

# Turkey as a Role Model in Chinese Newspapers of 1920-1930s

Wang Sanyi (Ed.). (2021).

The Road of Turkey: Research and  
Review of Chinese Scholars. Tianjin:  
Tianjin People's Publishing House.



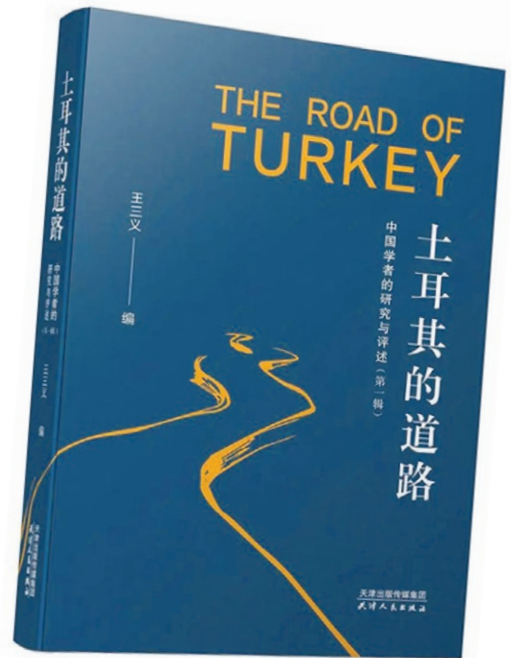
**YE ZHANGXU\***

Department of History, College of Liberal Arts, Shanghai University

BY THE 1920S, TURKEY SUCCESSFULLY transitioned from an empire to a republic, becoming a model of national independence and modernisation. This transformation inspired Chinese scholars in the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China to publish articles in newspapers, translate foreign news, and compile books on the Turkish revolution and reform. They introduced Turkey and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's historical achievements to the Chinese public. This not only reflected the Chinese public's desire to have a deeper understanding of the world but also laid the foundations for Chinese academia to pay persistent attention to Turkey.

The Road of Turkey: Research and Review

of Chinese Scholars (2021), edited by Professor Wang Sanyi from the Center for Turkish Studies at Shanghai University, is a new contribution to the limited work on this topic. The book contains 46 articles published in newspapers and periodicals of 1920-1930s, including political commentaries, translations, reports, and more. It focuses primarily on the four important stages of Turkey's national independence and national rejuvenation: the Turkish Revolution of 1908, the Collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish National Liberation Movement, and the Modern Reform of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. These articles demonstrate that Chinese scholars praised Turkey's road of rejuvenation highly at that time.



\* Ye Zhangxu is a master candidate majoring in World History in College of Liberal Arts and a research assistant of the Center for Turkish Studies at Shanghai University. His research fields include Turkey's foreign policy in contemporary era and China-Turkey relations in the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China.  
E-mail: yezx207@163.com

The first topic addresses the origin, process, result, and influence of the Turkish Revolution of 1908 through seven articles. There are two interpretations about the cause of the 1908 Revolution. One attributes it to the serious, widespread dissatisfaction with the authoritarian rule of Sultan Abdulhamid II. For example, “All public rallies, whether in the metropolis or in the provinces, are suspended as a strict ban” (p.3); “Sultan implemented the secret detective system, which is extended to the army, causing dissatisfaction among officers” (p.5). Meaning, before the revolution broke out, “Turkish politics is completely controlled by Abdul Hamid II; the people of Turkey succumb to autocracy every day” (p.3).

The second interpretation explains how patriotism and a new ideology emerged in reaction to the stimulating concept of nation-states forming in the West. For the Turks who studied abroad or fled to Europe, “They accepted the advanced ideology and culture of western countries and became more and more dissatisfied with the situation of their motherland. Therefore, they contacted each other and plotted to overthrow the autocratic system, hoping to restore the constitutional system” (p.44). Alongside this, “the invasion of Turkey by the European powers made Turkish revolutionaries feel more and more that the country was in crisis and that it was time for revolution” (p.45).

Two newspapers describe in detail the process of the revolution, *The History of Turkish Revolution* (p.3), *The Record of the Abdication of the Turkish Emperor Hamid* (p.22). Professor Wang Sanyi believes that there is a lot of speculation involved and that the stories about the Ottoman Sultan believing treacherous officials and disturbing politics are not uncommon, just like the ancient Chinese palace coups.

In addition, scholars had different opinions

**Some compared the Turkish people’s general reaction to the constitutional regime to that of the Chinese in the Preparatory Constitutionalism: “most people who have the right to vote do not know what a constitutional government is.”**

regarding the development and impact of the Young Turks Revolution. In the article, *On the Difficulties of the Young Turks* (p.29), the author’s comments were as follows: firstly, the power held by Young Turks after the revolution was still weak and unstable; secondly, the religious and ethnic policies of the Young Turks were unpopular; thirdly, the European Powers continued to invade Turkey, as Italy occupied Tripoli. Other scholars believed that “the constitutional regime implemented after the revolution is nothing more than to preserve the Sultan’s own rule”, “because the remnants of feudal despotism are still not gone” (p.17). Some compared the Turkish people’s general reaction to the constitutional regime to that of the Chinese in the Preparatory Constitutionalism: “most people who have the right to vote do not know what a constitutional government is” (p.33). Moreover, some scholars hold the idea that Turkey’s revival cannot be attributed entirely to Kemal and Inonu, that “the road to revival could not be completed in a short time, but was the result of the efforts of the Young Turks over the past 20 years” (p.94).

The second topic addresses the reasons for the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Although the decline of the Ottoman Empire began in the 17th century, its demise was directly related to World War I. First of all, Turkey’s strategic geography was an important reason for the Western powers

to plunder: “Located in the center of Europe, Asia and Africa continent, Ottoman-Turkey played an important role in military, religious and economic aspects, so it was the key point for the great powers to seek hegemony”(p.33). Secondly, internal strife among the great powers and the pursuit of self-preservation were also important reasons for Turkey to join Germany’s side:

**With 24 articles, the book highlights how contemporary Chinese scholars praised the Turkish Road and that Turkey became a model for the Chinese to follow. In essence, worries about China’s future and fate were the driving motivation for Chinese scholars to pay attention to Turkey.**

The article, Carve up Turkey in Paris Peace Conference (p84), explains in detail the competition and cooperation among the powers of Russia, Britain, and Germany on the issue of Turkey. Russia wanted to occupy the Marmara Sea, Britain wanted to maintain the air route from the western Mediterranean to the colonies in India, and Germany planned to establish a Great Germanic empire in the east. More importantly, the new army of the Young Turks, the backbone of the Turkish Revolution in 1908, was educated by Germans: “Therefore, Turkey helped Germany in this War entirely because of its long-term good relations with Germany, and they believed that Germany would win the final victory” (p.90). It is self-evident that pinning all hopes on Germany’s victory was unwise: “The weak Turkey has not only failed militarily, but also had a shortage of domestic materials, and the people’s living difficulties

have reached to the extreme” (p.91). Eventually, Turkey had to sign an armistice with the allies in October 1918. At the Paris Peace Conference that followed, the Ottoman Empire was dismembered as a defeated country.

The third topic discusses how to evaluate the national independence of Turkey and the reform of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. With 24 articles on this subject, it highlights how contemporary Chinese scholars praised the Turkish Road and that Turkey became a model for the Chinese to follow. In essence, worries about China’s future and fate were the driving motivation for Chinese scholars to pay attention to Turkey.

In the view of Western powers, Turkey and China were the sick men of Europe and East Asia, “But in the Greek occupation of Smyrna (Izmir), the Turkish nation used an unprecedented force to get rid of the shackles of the European powers for more than a hundred years; during the Conference of Lausanne, it took advantage of the division of the great powers to recover the territorial and economic rights that have always been lost by the Turkish state” (p.94); “However, our country was still under the cruel oppression of imperialism” (p.103). China had a similar situation with Turkey, though the former had a long way to go in exploring the road of national independence at that time.

The reforms implemented by Ataturk after the founding of the People’s Republic of Turkey opened a new era for Turkey’s development. Compared with Turkey, China was still afflicted by warlords. Chinese scholars hoped to learn from the successful experience of Turkish national independence and modernisation reforms. In order to achieve independence, it first was necessary to learn from Turkey and remove the unequal treaties with European powers.

## BOOK REVIEW



Chinese scholars hoped to learn from the successful experience of Turkish national independence and modernisation reforms. (Atatürk High Institution of Culture, Language and History's website)

“Turkey went from a semi-colony to a fully independent country through the war of national liberation and the Conference of Lausanne, while China’s unequal treaties have not been abolished, and extraterritoriality has not been fully recovered” (p.103). While praising the excellent diplomatic work of Ismet Inonu at the Conference of Lausanne, scholars expected the Chinese government and diplomats to make a difference. “Now we should strive to demand the revocation of the consular jurisdiction of the great powers in China and, like Turkey, unilaterally declare the abolition before signing a new multilateral treaty to solve the problem” (p.163).

For independence, the next lesson comes from Turkey's census policy. “Kemal and his colleagues eliminated all difficulties to carry out the census at the beginning of the Republic because Kemal fully understood that if you want to grasp the future road of a country, you must know the size of a country’s population first. While China has always ignored this important issue in history” (p.140).

Additionally, developing the domestic economy is of key importance. In articles such as New tax system in Turkey (p.101), Turkey’s reform policies (p.147), Turkey’s New Economic Construction and its Economic Rich Source



(p.173), a series of policies from the Kemal government to promote the development of a capitalist economy were handled. They included rectifying finance, rewarding industry, developing transportation, and so on. "In particular, Turkey's practice of introducing foreign capital to develop its economy coincided with Sun Yat-sen's industrial plan" (p.116). "Therefore, in the eyes of scholars, we should choose the advantages of Turkey's reform policy to imitate" (p.167).

**Modern Turkey and China have had similar national destinies. The rise of modern Turkey was not only an earth-shaking change for Chinese scholars at that time but also a successful modernisation movement.**

Certainly, not all Chinese scholars entirely appreciated Kemal's reforms. The most contentious issue was the reform of the writing system. Some thought that this reform was too radical for quick success and immediate benefits. "More haste, less speed. And it brought a lot of problems" (p.156). Other scholars were concerned with the issue of Turkish women's veils and their right to participate in politics. "The reform of removing the veil of women by Kemal has never been a complete success. First, it is not easy for the Turkish people to accept the good intentions of the government at this point; Second, the government is not so determined about this reform" (p.120). "For the sprout of the feminist movement, Kemal is not very radical either" (p.123). Generally speaking, however, scholars highly praise the road of Turkey's revival: "Its national liberation movement pioneered the success of the Asian national revolution. Its reform seems to be an example for China" (p.147).

Modern Turkey and China have had similar national destinies. The rise of modern Turkey was not only an earth-shaking change for Chinese scholars at that time but also a successful modernisation movement. When we explore the views of the scholars on the image of Turkey in the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China, we cannot make comparisons without the use of historical materials of newspapers and periodicals. Therefore, through the collection, selection, and arrangement of newspapers from this period, Professor Wang Sanyi has created an important and comprehensive guide.

Overall, the selected articles in this book represent the achievements of Chinese scholars' research on Turkey in the 1920-1930s and act as an important witness to contemporary Chinese scholars' research on Turkish academic ideas. These articles not only give us a more intuitive understanding of the evolution of Chinese scholars' views on Turkey but also build a stronger historical understanding of the development of modern Sino-Turkish relations.

A slight deficiency of the book is that most of the included articles are taken from *The Eastern Miscellany*. The book does not include other articles about Turkey published by other popular newspapers from this period, such as *Shun Pao*. Moreover, in addition to the newspapers and periodicals founded by Han people, there were also newspapers such as *Yuehua* and *Tujue* founded by Hui intellectuals. These have unique insights on Turkish studies, are of considerable value for reference, and therefore deserve a place in this history.

**Acknowledgement:** This article is supported by funding from "Key Project of Philosophy and Social Sciences of Ministry of Education of China" (17JZD036).