

Chinese classics find Turkish admirers

Yao Minji

The Chinese book on military strategy, “The Art of War,” written over 25 centuries ago, ranks among the world’s most extensively translated bestsellers. But it was not until 2014 that Turkish readers read the novel translated from its original 6,075 characters written in classic Chinese.

Dr Giray Fidan, a Turkish sinologist, author and translator, had it translated for the first time with the help of his professor from the original Chinese. Previous Turkish publications were based on translations from other Western languages, such as English or French.

The new version has been reprinted 24 times in the span of nine years, with the most recent edition published in October. He has translated a wide range of Chinese works, from centuries-old classics to contemporary novels, with “Dream of the Red Chamber” being one of the most challenging works. He has been



Dr Giray Fidan poses at the Lu Xun Museum. His translations of Lu Xun’s “The Diary of a Madman” and “The True Story of Ah Q” will be published next year.

working on the translation for eight years and expects to finish it in two years.

Fidan, who was in Shanghai for the two-day World Conference on China Studies Shanghai Forum in mid-November, spoke exclusively with Shanghai Daily about how his interest in China began, where it is headed, and some rarely explored parallels between China and Türkiye.

Q: How did you get interested in Chinese?

During my time in primary school, I bought a book called “The Magic Paintbrush,” which ignited my initial fascination with Chinese culture. I got into the sinology department at the university, and about 14 years later, we translated “The Art of War” for the first time from classical Chinese to Turkish in 2014.

Q: Reprinted 24 times in nine years sounds like a success; what are the reasons behind the success?

It’s a big success in any regard. There are a few reasons.

First of all, it’s internationally recognized as a brilliant and very useful book. Of course, the fact that it is the first translation from the original language is also very important. It also belongs to a well-known series of translated classics.

I also included the famous test of Sun Tzu’s strategy on the king’s concubines in the introduction. That is a very important and interesting story, which could also attract readers.

Q: Are other translations of Chinese books as successful?

A lot of the classics I translated directly from the original Chinese are quite successful. These classics generate great interest among Turkish readers, particularly due to their direct translation from the

original Chinese. The publishers reprinted “The Analects” five times in two years. The book “Guiguzi” underwent six reprints within a span of two years.

I have also translated “Zhen Guan Zheng Yao,” or “The Essentials of Governance,” which is going to be published in December.

Q: That’s not a very well-read or well-translated book; why did you pick it?

You are right. The English translation only came out two years ago. But it’s a very important book, similar to the works by Machiavelli, where you get to know the essentials of day-to-day governance. It’s also a very interesting book because it’s filled with many small stories that reflect Chinese approaches, Chinese philosophy and Chinese ways of thinking.

It’s also quite unbiased and honest, I think. When you read it, you can see that it’s not just whitewashing everything; that’s very precious.

Plus, there aren’t many books from the 7th century in the first place, not to mention translations.

Q: I heard you are also translating “Dream of the Red Chamber” or have been doing it for a while.

Yes, it’s been eight years, and it would take about another two years. I think it’s going to be the top translation of my entire life or career.

It’s one of the top five bestsellers in human history, so people know about the book and read small parts of it here and there, but it hasn’t been translated into Turkish in full. It’s definitely a challenge.

Q: Are there successful translations of contemporary novels or mainly classics?

The interest in contemporary Chinese works has also been rising in Türkiye, especially

after Mo Yan won the Nobel Prize. Whether it’s a success or not also depends on the stories. For example, very few Turkish people had heard of Lao She before, but we just translated “Cat Country” with my PhD students.

It has been reprinted four times in a year, possibly indicating its dystopian nature. I think it’s the second dystopia in human history. In 1921, Russian writer Yevgeny Zamyatin published “We,” followed by the publication of “Cat Country” in 1933. Several more works were released in the 1940s and 1950s.

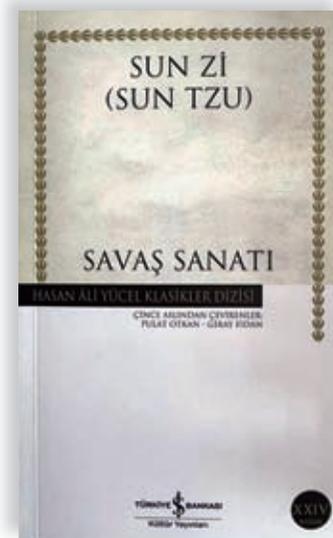
Q: You also mentioned some rarely explored connections between China and Türkiye?

In 1937, when the Japanese invaded Nanjing, they had to move the capital city from Nanjing to Chongqing. Some Chinese newspaper articles called it “Chongqing, Our Ankara,” drawing parallels between the situation in China and the precedent of a capital relocation in Türkiye in 1923 for similar reasons. We wrote a paper based on these findings.

The journalists and authors who drew those parallels want to motivate Chinese readers by highlighting that, like the Turks, we relocated our capital and will also defeat the invaders.

And much earlier, in the 16th century, there was a book called “Alī Akbar’s Khataynameh,” which means “The Book of China.” Alī Akbar wrote it in Persian in Istanbul and later translated it into Turkish. The book was presented to the Sultan. It was like a manual for the emperor — kind of a model for reforming the Ottoman Empire at the time.

So you can see that our connections began in the 16th century and were mutual — a kind of learning from each other.



The 24th reprint of the Turkish translation of Sun Tzu’s “The Art of War.”



“The Book of China” by Alī Akbar



“Cat Country” by Lao She was first published in 1933.