

# Liljana Arsovska's life of translating Chinese literature

By WAN DAI

She has translated many modern and contemporary Chinese literary works into Spanish, allowing Mexican and Latin American readers to appreciate the charm of Chinese literature and culture. A foremost Sinologist and translator in Latin America, Liljana Arsovska is also a professor from the Center for Asian and African Studies at the College of Mexico. In a recent interview, Arsovska looks back on how she embarked on the path of Chinese studies and literary translation. She also provides insights into measures she adopts to deal with cultural differences in translation.

**Wan Dai: You started your study in China by learning Chinese and finished it with a well-written paper on *Dream of the Red Chamber* and Chinese classical literature. Why did you choose *Dream of the Red Chamber* as the topic of your graduation thesis?**

**Liljana Arsovska:** I liked reading when I was in middle school and high school in Macedonia. I always considered books as a window to the world. I chose *Dream of the Red Chamber* because of a female professor who emphasized this novel when she talked about literary classics in class. So I started reading it. It was so difficult that I had to read one page many times to understand since I only had studied Chinese for three years. I frequently turned to the professor and asked her to explain.

*Dream of the Red Chamber* is more than a literary work to me. It is also an encyclopedia about traditional Chinese society. It contains two major elements of China: family and country. Reading the book is a process of understanding how Chinese families function. *Dream of the Red Chamber* has many characters connected by various forms of relationships. It tells and explains everything to you. Foreigners' mode of perception and their way of understanding the world are different from those of Chinese, and thereby they find it tough to figure out what the classical work is about. For example, it took me many years to understand the hierarchical concept of Chinese families that can be displayed by how family members address each other. For example, the third child undoubtedly obeys the second and the elderly children, but he or she can exert authority on the fourth and fifth children. In the Western individualistic culture, however, it is difficult to understand this. This book also depicts the miserable and beautiful love story between Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu showing how Chinese people deal with their feelings, which differs widely from how Westerners do.

*Dream of the Red Chamber* de-



**Liljana Arsovska** is Sinologist and translator from Mexico. She is also a professor from the Center for Asian and African Studies at the College of Mexico. Born in Macedonia, she later became a Mexican citizen. Arsovska studied at Beijing Language and Culture University from 1981 to 1985. After further study, she obtained a doctorate in comparative literature and world literature in 2002. She has devoted to teaching Chinese and translating contemporary Chinese novels for more than three decades. Her translations include Spanish versions of *A Sentence Is Worth Thousands*, *My Name Is Liu Yuejin* and *I Did Not Kill My Husband*.

serves repeated reading as it supplies new perspectives each time readers engage with the book. It is a work at the peak of literature. It is demanding to translate into any language, and the difficulty doesn't come from language but rather the cultural differences embedded in the text. I find it hard to read classical Chinese literature, but I enjoy the process. I think the ancient Chinese texts are not only exquisite but also symbolic in terms of linguistic structure. This is of immense scholarship.

**Wan Dai: You are a European scholar living in Mexico. How much personal experience and academic experience have helped you in your research on China?**

**Liljana Arsovska:** As you said, my native language is neither Spanish nor Chinese but Macedonian. Macedonian does not belong to the Romance languages, having nothing to do with Chinese or Spanish. But I was born in a socialist country, and I could better understand China than those from the non-socialist countries in the Western Hemisphere. When I read Chinese literature, I don't need to read a lot of notes, but a lot of things need

to be explained to the Spaniards, Mexicans and French. One day it hit me that my personal experience formed an advantage that allowed me to know many parts of the world. I understand the Balkans as I am from that region. I understand Latin America because I have lived and worked there for over 30 years. I know China well since I have been there for four years, and now I often visit the country.

Of course, Spanish is not my native language. During my early years in Mexico, Spanish was an obstacle. However, my perseverance and years of reading Spanish and using it in my work have made me feel comfortable with it, which allows me to do a lot of things in my career and academic life, such as teaching and researching the Chinese language, and translation of modern Chinese literature into Spanish. As a Macedonian living in Mexico, I think it is an advantage to study China with the help of multiple languages.

**Wan Dai: You have said that over the years, the translation of Chinese literature into Spanish has made you feel unspeakable joy.**

**Liljana Arsovska:** Yes. One day I realized that I had read a lot of Chinese literature, novels in particular. But since Spanish is not my mother tongue, I was hesitant for years about engaging in textual translation. Later, I sat down and began to translate Wang Meng's short story "The Stubborn Porridge" into Spanish. I liked this story very much for being a good example of the megatrends and contradictions in Chinese society in the early days of the reform and opening up. It was very interesting and funny. I said to myself: "Well, I want to translate it." I showed the translated text to a few colleagues. They asked me why I didn't publish it. The passion for my life took form. Literary translation by far is the most exciting thing for me.

I also like interpretation, but I prefer literary translation. Let me tell you why. Interpretation will be gone with the wind. Of course, it is important as it can produce changes and assist bilateral exchanges. Literary translation, however, has opened many windows for readers using Spanish in Mexico and Latin America, allowing these people to see different Chinese landscapes.

In addition to displaying China, novels also invite you to see a beautiful language and introduce you to some living characters. Foreign readers will suddenly realize that the Chinese are no different from them. Chinese are concerned about the same things. The characters love, hate, and suffer just like they do. Despite this, I'm disinclined to say that there are no significant cultural differences between the two groups. I felt these differences when I translated contemporary Chinese literature into Spanish.

**Wan Dai: How do you handle these cultural differences to seek a form of balance?**

**Liljana Arsovska:** Because I have developed bonds with China for more than 30 years, many things are self-explanatory to me. However, before publication, my colleagues or friends who do not know much about China would raise a lot of interesting questions when they saw the translated texts. So in the process of translation, if there are a few things much harder than language, they are cultural differences.

How to deal with idioms, proverbs, enigmatic folk similes and many expressions derived from Chinese classical culture? Should I translate them with literary language, or replace them by a similar concept in the West? How to explain the ideas that don't exist in Western values? I was attracted by this pattern of cultural difference. Sometimes I sat in front of the computer like a madman. Facing these problems, I was very excited about figuring out how to solve them. Sometimes I intended

to simplify to remove obstacles for readers, but later I believed that readers had the right to know China and to understand the differences in China. I should help them get close to China, instead of trying to turn China into another Mexico. On the contrary, I want to exaggerate these differences. Although sometimes I sacrifice some cultural differences for the sake of fluency, beauty, or stories' logic, I think that the world has the right to understand what makes China a country like this.

**Wan Dai: What should be done to promote the translation of contemporary Chinese literature into Spanish?**

**Liljana Arsovska:** We still have a long way ahead and the work to be done is endless. You can never chase and catch a wild rabbit. Similarly, when you finish translating a novel, there will be another 100 in the market. I have finished reading Jia Pingwa's novel *Broken Wings*. I like Jia Pingwa. This book has been published in Mexico.

I will continue to focus on the study of contemporary Chinese literature. We have a team and our colleagues' studies are very interesting. For example, I have five students now who are good at Chinese and Spanish with strong skills for literary expression. We are all very excited and have a lot of work on hand. We study Fang Fang. She is a beautiful female writer. We explore Alai, Mai Jia, and Xu Zechen. We will try to choose elite writers to study, as well as the writers who tell more personal experiences. I think literature rests within two topics. One topic is basically about individuals while the other touches upon collectives.

This categorization may be a little simplistic because those important and precious personal experiences can also reflect collective life. For example, Jia Pingwa's *Broken Wings* narrates the story of a woman who is freed after three years of being abducted. It is not a problem of Jia Pingwa, nor a problem of Liljana, but a concern about Chinese development. In 1980, about 80% of China's population lived in rural areas and citizens accounted for 20% of the country's population. By 2017, the proportion of the urban and rural population in China was 50% each. Just imagine demographic changes that China has undergone. Jia Pingwa chose a clever way to reveal China's urbanization process and the problems encountered by the countryside. I like novels like this as they not only provide Spanish readers with beautiful literary work but also introduce to them a problem with Chinese characteristics.

In the process of globalization, what we strive to do is to develop intimacy between China and Mexico through literature.