

I Sense You in My Reading

Wenshuang Lin (Beijing Foreign Studies University, China)

The years before I was eighteen, for me, Bulgaria was no more than the name itself. It appeared merely in geography and history textbooks. Since then, however, the word Bulgaria directed my professional career, the path of my life and even my sense of being. I sense the country through the study of its language – the ancient Thracian folk, the Slavic culture, the smell of rose essence, and the smiles on the faces of Bulgarians....

The tipping point of my life appeared in an April day of 1993, I was sitting in the classroom, reading and smelling the lilac-scented air. The teacher declared that someone from Beijing Foreign Studies University (formerly known as the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute) came to select future learners of Eastern European languages and asked if we were interested. “Eastern Europe? What does it look like? What kind of life do the people there live? Are the languages they speak similar to English or not at all? ...” The series of questions crashed into my mind, and I raised my hand. I was led to an office along with a couple of my classmates. Then I was tested, interviewed, and waited for the result.

It looked as if an act of impulse had changed the course of my life. But actually it was a decision made out of my instincts, as was reflected in those questions. After so many years, I am still grateful to the curiousness and anxiety of my youth, which inspired me to explore culture of the far away European, and more specifically later on – Bulgarian. From learning the language to understanding its history and customs, I am approaching Bulgaria spiritually by reading.

Bulgaria is not a big country in general sense, with a population about half that of Beijing. But it is a nation with a long history and plenty of cultural heritages. As a researcher of Bulgarian studies, I am still a junior swimmer at the shallow water, who is yet to have a taste of the surging waves at the deeper end. What I can boast of is a certain courage that comes with blissful ignorance. I am also lucky enough, because as a swimmer, my coach and the audience always cheer me on, so I have confidence to pursue the studies in depth.

I teach Bulgarian language and culture at Beijing Foreign Studies University after graduating from it. As a researcher, my study focuses on the history of Bulgaria and the Bulgarian nation. I associate the study of history with language teaching for some special reason. As is known to all, the Cyrillic Alphabet used in Bulgarian and many other Slavic languages was established in the 9th century AD. The state of Bulgaria, however, had been existing for two centuries before that. How was the history of Bulgaria before the establishment of Cyrillic recorded? This becomes a question that drives me to get close to and dig out the truth of history.

In the studying process, I aim at acquiring as many historical records from as many channels as I can. My bibliography often consists of documents in Bulgarian, English and Russian. In the case of Bulgarian studies, reading historical records before the use of Cyrillic is not possible without referring to Greek documentation. So I do need to use secondary sources of Greek originals. I have to admit that in practice my aim to acquire more historical records is a kind of ideal. Not to mention the huge project of recording the history of a state and a nation, keeping records of our own lives is difficult enough. I had tried to recollect the details before and after my twentieth year by tracing my diaries. Yet I found that but for the most memorable episodes in the depth of my memory, I can hardly recall what myself was like at that age. In my diaries, I could find only my emotions towards certain things and people, no coherent fact, no revelation of truth. I suppose an outsider in no case could figure out what I was like through my diaries. The only possible way to reconstruct my life at that time is to collect the diaries of all my family members and my closest friends at the time, to sift out all elements about me from their diaries and then put the pieces together. All this is based on the assumption that people around me also had the habit of keeping a journal.

People always cannot help shaping themselves. Countries and nations do the same. Every piece of history is written by people who inevitably make judgments. Yet history writing requires accuracy, objectivity and just, qualities inconsistent with human nature. Given this, I strive to strike a balance, that is, to doubt the judgment of each side, to retain a little bit of doubt in my mind. Only when records of various languages from different resources debate and fight with each other can the readers possibly get closer to the truth of history.

Still, I dare not say what I have acquired is completely true because I am also skeptical of my own judgments. Thus the road of my research is full of doubting,

exploring, finding and doubting again. It may look like self-repetitive circles, but I believe it is an endless upward spiral.

If I had been given one more chance to choose the course of my life, I would have chosen to do the same work – to teach this non-commonly used language and explore the history and culture of this nation in my reading. Because I speak Bulgarian, the Bulgarians treat me as a friend who understands their thinking and appreciates their culture. I do hope I am not a friend in the general sense. I am trying to explore the nation from various perspectives to find the essence of the Bulgarian nationality, both its brightness and its darkness.