

External Examiner's Report on the Dissertation of Rachel Mikos
Ambiguity and Abstraction in Mongolian Riddles: An Ethnolinguistic Analysis
Submitted in 2020 at the Institute of Asian Studies

I. Brief summary of the dissertation

The aim of the PhD-candidate was to analyse a prudently selected corpus of Mongolian riddles based on ethnolinguistic approach. As this frame of investigation is traditional at the Seminar of Mongolian and Tibetan Studies at Charles University, Rachel Mikos's dissertation fits appropriately into the long-lasting project of the faculty members. She developed her own interpretation based on the previous studies, but was able to introduce innovative aspects of research, i.e. analysing the ambiguity in the corpus of a particular folklore genre, the Mongolian riddles. First, she introduced her paradigm of investigation; following the clarification of the terminology and her understanding of the grammatical and philological interpretation of ambiguity and abstraction, she established her typology of riddles according to their content. The content analysis is based on various aspects of Mongolian nomadic ethos with a particular focus on the world comprehension and its metaphorical manifestation.

II. Brief overall evaluation of the dissertation

Rachel Mikos chose a topic which is innovative in the field of Mongolian studies: i) the corpus of riddles she was working on, is one of the insufficiently studied subjects, ii) her approach, the investigation of ambiguity on the items of her text-corpus is a novelty as well. The opponent highly estimates the candidate's endeavour that follows the best traditions of the workshop at the Seminar of Mongolian and Tibetan studies at Charles University aiming the investigation of the Mongolian nomadic phenomena in an ethnolinguistic framework. The faculty members' research on the metaphorical understanding of the nomadic phenomena is foremost in this field in the international Mongolian studies. The candidate based her own analysis on her "masters'" results, but was ambitious enough to choose an approach almost untouched in Mongolistics. The riddle corpus recorded among various Mongolian ethnic groups is well-defined, and there are records at our disposal since the 19th century. The most extensive known collections are the publications of Lowor and Öljixutag (1990) and Öljixutag (2013). More than one-hundred items from this collection comprises the basis of the analysis. Pairing the riddles and the problem of ambiguity is a challenging venture, but the candidate committed herself to go through the material. Both her choice of sources and methodology are unique.

The main body of the dissertation is devoted to the typology of the particular corpus of more than one-hundred riddles selected carefully from a large corpus (more than 10. 000 items). The first chapter discusses the basic terminology of the examination. In the second chapter, the candidate offers an analysis of some texts being ambiguous due to various kinds of grammatical corruption – in fact commonly – observable in riddles. In chapters 3rd–7th riddle-groups are analysed according to their content focusing on the traditional world comprehension in Mongolian nomadic society. The author’s approach in this respect is original and innovative; however, some of her arguments might be doubtful (e. g. about the correlation of the *galbinga* and the roots or the shamaness and the dwelling/pasture *nutag*, etc.). Especially successful is the chapter on the riddles about the fire (chapter 5) which can be comprehended as a masterpiece and the foremost “case study” among the chapters.

The structure of the dissertation and the hang of the argumentation is apparent, and in most cases, quite convincing. Besides the grammatical analysis demonstrated in the second chapter, the main ground-breaking idea of the dissertation is the recognition of the traces of cosmic (macro- and micro-cosmic) metaphors in the texts. The “tricky” associations between objects, persons and abstract phenomena definitely might carry these ideas about the traditional belief system and the Buddhicised folk religion. The identification and recognition of the correlation between the question (in the Mongolian case rather a statement) and the answer pairs can be explained – as the candidate did it – as the reflection of an ancient (pre-Buddhist) and a later developed Buddhicised world comprehension. The analysis of riddle-groups and the particular riddles are careful, and informative, however in the details there are – according to the opponent’s understanding – misinterpretations (cf. below). The dissertation is based on a comprehensive reference literature concerning the methodology. Still, a survey of the Mongolian riddle text corpora is missing, so does a terminological review of the term “riddle” in various Mongolian languages. Much laudable is the effort of the author to collect explanation from informants. Two of her main informants are well-known scholars of Mongolian philological studies and Mongolian and Tibetan Buddhism which has a very favourable aspect, as they grew up in a milieu where the riddles belonged to the traditional knowledge and ethno-pedagogy. On the other hand, they can offer scholarly explanation to particular problematic points. But a “classical” field monitoring is lacking. Maybe nowadays is the last chance to meet such people whose knowledge is based not only on the riddle corpus of schoolbooks, but heard them from an elder generation. Such an investigation could bring results on the explanation of the riddles, but might point out the changes and the missing (lost) context as well.

III. Detailed evaluation of the dissertation and its individual aspects

1. Structure of the argument

The structure of the whole dissertation is transparent and logical (an overview on the structure, see Mikos pp. 17–20). The candidate has the ability to show all her data in a well-defined research paradigm and she follows it consequently. In the introductory parts (first and second chapters), she successfully and clearly established the framework of her investigation. Concerning the terminology and the research methodology she attested her approach and methods analysing some relatively obscure riddle examples (second chapter). All her research questions have been formulated clearly as well (e. g. Mikos p. 13.). In chapters 3rd–7th she conducted a comprehensive research centred on the following main topics: *i*) Mongolian mythical worldview rooting in the pre-Buddhist times, *ii*) Buddhist phenomena in the sacred and profane spheres, *iii*) movement, stillness, space, etc.

She commands well the abundance of the source data, placed all pieces of information (from the primary sourcebook, some collections of variants, and the data recorded from her informant) into a transparent frame.

2. Formal aspects of the dissertation

Mikos's work is perfect, concerning the formal criteria of a PhD-dissertation. The well-edited content is illustrated not only with the riddles, their glossings and translation (all of them installed into a precisely established, clear-cut pattern), but with photo illustrations and the drawings of the author. The sketches of macro- and micro-cosmic designs made by the candidate are additional explanations to her ideas about the metaphorical world comprehension.

3. Use of sources and/or material

Rachel Mikos has a good command of the relevant literature for her argumentation, but, as it was mentioned above, the few detailed analyses of Mongolian riddles are missing. She quotes A. Mostaert's *Folklore Ordos* (1947); however, to some points for the argumentation of the dissertation she can find additional material. E. g. the opponent discussed the structure of the Mongolian riddles. Even if the majority of the riddles are statements, in particular circumstances (Mikos p. 30, cf. my argumentation), they appear as questions. If she looks through the articles listed below, she will also find very early mentions (19th century) of some data she discussed as well. See the Tibetan names of Dondog and Genden, the mention of the sun-metaphor, and the Buddhist musical instruments as solutions for riddles of ironic (sarcastic) style from 1873 (Birtalan 2013).

To mention some studies based on smaller corpora of riddles, Uirankhai, Kalmyk and Khalkha. Even if she wished to restrict her analysis only on the Khalkha material, the way of elaboration of specific field research results could enrich her scope and also offer some parallel texts to her selection.

cf. Kara, G[yörgy] 1987. “Mongol Uriankhai Riddles”, In: *AOH* XLI, pp. 15–39; Birtalan, Ágnes 2011. *Kalmyk Folklore and Folk Culture in the mid-19th Century. Philological Studies on the Basis of Gábor Bálint of Szentkatolna’s Kalmyk Texts*. (Oriental Studies 15), Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences – Kalmyk Institute of Humanitarian Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Budapest – Elista; Birtalan, Ágnes 2014. “Riddles in the Khalkha Records Gábor Bálint of Szentkatolna”, In: Bareja-Starzińska, Agata – Rogala, Jan – Majkowski, Filip (ed.): *A Window onto the Other. Contributions on the Study of the Mongolian, Turkic and Manchu-Tungusic Peoples, Languages and Cultures. Dedicated to Jerzy Tulisow on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*. Warsaw, Elipsa pp. 65–78.

In the opponent’s articles quoted above, more riddle collections are also mentioned that are recommendable for the further studies of the candidate.

4. Personal contribution to the subject

- 1) Establishing a new research topic via utilising new methodology on an insufficiently studied folklore genre, the riddles (more precisely the Khalkha riddles) in the Mongolian studies.
- 2) Surveying a large corpus of riddles and selecting those items that reflect the metaphorical understanding of the macro- and micro-cosmos in the nomadic ethos.
- 3) Relating her research topic and its result to an ongoing project.
- 4) Translating the enigmatic riddle texts that attests her excellent command of Mongolian language and being aware of the nomadic context.

IV. Questions for the author

1. Please explain the separation of argumentation on spatial phenomena! The Movement and Stillness, Speed, and Intensities (chapter 4) and Riddle Space of the Steppe (chapter 7) could be discussed in causality – according to the opponent’s understanding. Alternatively, Riddle Space could be the 3rd chapter as a kind of introduction on the worldview.
2. Please explain the logic of the sequence in grammatical patterning (Mikos pp. 32–33.)! According to the opponent’s view mingling the syntactical and morphological categories makes her – otherwise exciting and innovative – analysis pattern to some extent confused. E. g. it is advisable to start with such categories and Noun (A), Verb (B) ... etc.

IV/1. Some minor suggestions to the dissertation

p. 60. Please consider the possible variant for the keywords of the mentioned riddle *xun* – *xudai* as *xud* – *xudgui*.

p. 71, 118. Not paper – chapter.

p. 77. *Emč lamīn xon’/Ereg dagan belčilne*. – might be the rice and other grain offering.

p. 80. *Sün dalain usīg ūjē* ... is a part of a widely spread spell (Khal. *dom šiwšleg*) used during castration of rams.

p. 98. Please consider whether this item is really a “gently mocking” one.

For the replacement of items on altars and its changes, cf. Birtalan, Ágnes 2016. *The Objectification and the Rational Choice: The Role of Sacred Images in Mongolian Buddhist Folk Religion*. Hamar, Imre – Takami, Inoue: *Faith in Buddhism*. (Budapest Monographs in East Asian Studies 6.) Budapest, Institute for East Asian Studies, Eötvös Loránd University pp. 189–204.

p. 118. *golomt* – hearth

p. 142. For the cult of fire please quote: Dumas, Dominique 1987. *Aspekte und Wandlungen der Verehrung des Herdfeuers bei den Mongolen. Eine Analyse der mongolischen „Feuergebete“*. Bonn, Universität Bonn.

p. 159. *bōgīn šašin* – is inadequate here, *bō mörgöl* is the relevant expression in the context.

p. 179. Concerning the “selling” of the defeated part in a riddle competition, some members of the group could be really sold or enslaved (discussed by Kara in the above mentioned article).

p. 195. Instead of Archie Taylor, please write Archer Taylor.

p. 199. Instead Da Sečen, please write Dei Sečen.

V. Conclusion

On the basis of the above arguments, and Rachel Mikos’s previously published articles, I recommend the submitted dissertation with the **tentative grade of pass**.

10.10.2020.

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