

## **External Examiner's Report on the Dissertation of Rachel MIKOS**

### ***"Ambiguity and Abstraction in Mongolian Riddles: An Ethnolinguistic Analysis"***

**Submitted in 2020 at Charles University, Faculty of Arts,  
Institute of Asian Studies (Languages of Asia and Africa)**

#### **I. Brief summary of the dissertation**

The present dissertation provides a detailed analysis of about 120 Mongolian riddles using ethnolinguistics methodology and guided by G. Deleuze and F. Guattari's theoretical writings on "nomadology", and by S. Dulam and G. Nandinbilig's research on riddles in the light of Mongolian origin myths. The dissertation is divided in seven fairly autonomous sections discussing distinct traits of the riddles or looking at them from the specific standpoints adopted by the student. A word-for-word translation and a linguistic gloss complete the translation of the Mongolian material. The research relied mainly on interviews conducted with four solid Mongolian informants in order to uncover the culturally grounded relations and interpretations underlying the riddles.

#### **II. Brief overall evaluation of the dissertation**

The dissertation is 223 pages long and was elaborated in several stages leading to four publications on which three chapters are based. The language of the thesis is excellent, the layout is clear, footnotes and bibliography are well formatted, ideas and citations properly identified, misprints are rare. Relevant illustrations (59) complement the text. The absence of Latinization of the Mongolian Cyrillic script used for the riddle material is, however, regrettable. Regarding the sources – ten thousand riddles collected by Mongolian folklorists in the countryside since the 1950s and published as collections –, the student selected 120 examples and analysed each one in detail. The linguistic, cultural and symbolic aspects of each example are seriously investigated. No comparison is proposed with riddles sharing a similar subject within the collections (despite the detailed classification and practical index of 4000 riddles provided by one corpus). A presentation of the prevalent topics and forms of Mongolian riddles based on the existing collections could have been useful. The analysis discusses in depth the structure of the riddles, the cultural references they contain and the relations they establish at another, cosmological, level, served by the ambiguity of the Mongolian language. In the process, the argumentation becomes sometimes disembodied to the point of becoming unintelligible, in particular when putting to work Deleuze's concepts. The conclusions reached by the student appear in places too speculative, vague and far-fetched in view of the empirical data. Yet, such drawbacks reflect also appropriate efforts to develop an informed and fresh thinking on Mongolian riddles that combine the nomads' emic perspective with concepts from a settled culture inspired precisely by nomadic societies. The general outcome of this research should therefore be assessed in the light of the student's original and elaborate contribution to the field.

#### **III. Detailed evaluation of the dissertation and its individual aspects**

*Structure of the argument*

The dissertation (223 p.) is organised in seven chapters, three of which are based on articles published in 2014 and 2015 (chapter 2), 2018 (chapter 5), 2017 (chapter 6), and a previous version of chapter 4 was presented at a conference in 2016. Such genesis explains probably the structure in self-contained and balanced chapters, each dealing with a formal aspect of the riddles or analysing them from a distinct perspective.

The study is based on a limited corpus of some 120 riddles (to be compared with the 14 000 riddles published in two main collections of riddles in Mongolia) but submitted to in-depth ethnolinguistic analysis. One can regret that no comparison was conducted with similar riddles in order to give more substance to the demonstration. An important part of the ethnographic data was gathered through interviews and discussions with four Mongolian informants. They provided the indispensable emic views and interpretations of the riddles, shed light on the metaphors they contain and the nomads' conceptions and experience they reflect. The starting definition of the Mongolian riddles in the work is borrowed from Dulam & Nandinbilig's (2007) theoretical work on oral literature: to sum up, a genre closely associated to myths of origin and directed towards non-human forces. The ethnolinguistic approach is complemented by the use of Deleuze & Guattari's (1980) philosophical concepts related to the "nomadology" such as vague, nomadic morphological essences; smooth vs. striated space; rhizomatic organisation, de-territorialization and re-territorialization...: 42).

The arguments developed in the thesis are presented in a grammatical and fluid English supported by a clear layout of the text. The objective of the research is set in the introduction (13) and the content of the chapters outlined. The student indicates that the work does not propose a classification nor an overview of Mongolian riddles: as explained, the collective quality of Mongolian culture "seem to work against a methodology that would classify and atomize and perhaps even work against the spirit of the riddles themselves" (14). In an academic study, a brief overview of the existing corpora of riddles and their classification by Mongolian folklorists, and of the state of the research would have been appropriate and constitute a useful background, which is lacking here.

The methodology and important concepts underpinning the thesis are discussed in the first chapter: "ambiguity" and "abstraction" at work in the Mongolian syntax, morphology and vocabulary and to a lesser and probably insufficient extent the Deleuzian concepts such as "vague essence" and "nomadic morphology", "rhizomatic", some others appearing only later ("smooth" vs "striated" space appear later in chap. 4). Some other relevant points (ethno-pedagogy, ideophones) are presented in footnotes in the introduction and could have been more developed.

Contrary to the other chapters, the initial chapter has a dozen pages exposing the question before addressing and illustrating it directly through the analysis of a few selected riddles. To expose the pattern of the riddle, letters are indistinctly attributed to categories (verbs, nouns) and grammatical markers then used by themselves (34-41), however, the result is not convincing and a classical interlinear gloss would have been more helpful. In the following six chapters, one is on the linguistic erosion and modifications occurring in the language of the riddles (, and five develop ethnological topics such as "The sacred and the Profane", "Movement and Stillness, Speed and Intensities" or "To see the Cosmos in a Wooden Box". The argumentation is articulated around the detailed analysis of successive riddles, the common thread being the topic of the chapter.

Although informed and well-researched and yielding interesting results and questions, the free-wheeled approach can also entail also vagueness in the argumentation, overgeneralization and at times insufficient linguistic rigour letting lyrism and subjectivity take the lead. For examples: p. 48, "Not only riddles, but words and language themselves have a completely different function in Mongolian nomadic culture. This too forms an important part of nomadic morphology — words do not have the 'unbearable lightness' they often seem to have in the global North but carry something

of the weight of reality with all of its majesty and fearfulness". On the unidentified word *yagnaa*, p. 52, the interpretation is not founded on a solid basis. Addressing p. 24 the question of indeterminacy, the word *övör* ("southern part; front") in "*övör* of Mount Burkhan Khaldun" in the SHM is given as an illustration of a "vague object" in philosophical as well as in linguistic terms, which does not feel here appropriate. There are several instances of imprecise, unexpected, analogies that are not developed, as p. 47, when proposing to connect the etymology of the word "riddle" in Mongolian, connected to the idea of an opening and at the same time (sic) of closing "to the sense of taboo around the deities and the Earth Spirits in Mongolian". As for the ethno-pedagogical role of the riddles, regularly and rightly stressed, its important role as a mind-teaser to develop cognitive abilities of the young ones could have been discussed in connection with the notions of ambiguity and abstraction.

### *Formal aspects of the dissertation*

The language of the thesis is very good, the layout is clear, footnotes and bibliography are properly formatted, ideas and citations properly identified, misprints are rare (p. 14, 27, 49, 56, "1996" in note 204, ...). A number of illustrations (59) are complementing the text appropriately.

The main problem in the formal aspects of the dissertation is the choice to use the Cyrillic script rather than Latinization for the data given in Mongolian. There is a lack of coherence, since authors' names are Latinized. Considering the literary and ethno-linguistic approach, a transcription of the Cyrillic allows specialists of these fields who are not versed in Slavic alphabets to read and cite the work. It is all the more surprising given that the candidate indicates in several places how the study of Mongolian riddles can help de-centralize and de-occidentalize the research on riddles based on Indo-European languages. How can this be achieved this while giving such limited access to the data? The bibliography is well presented. It could have included more ethnographical research from Mongolian and Western specialists, given the importance of understanding the cultural and symbolic background of the riddles to understand the meaning of the riddles.

Rem.: the reference to the Dictionary of Old turkic misses two of the 4 authors; the reference to Vladimirtsov 2005, a reedition, should have indicated the date of first publishing; the transcription of Tsydemdambaeva is with a "y" rather than a "i"; Choimaa, not Tsoimaa ; misprint in Bazardörj (in Cyrillic).

*Questions for the author:* I will address my questions during the defence.

### **Conclusion**

As shown above, the dissertation is not a mere compilation of information. The candidate has a personal and creative reflection and has shown a healthy curiosity for other disciplines' concepts not commonly used in her field but susceptible to enrich her perspective. As a result, she is able to fulfil her set objective regarding a representative corpus of riddles, and provides here an original contribution to the study of Mongolian riddles.

I recommend the submitted dissertation with the tentative grade of **pass/fail**.

October 13<sup>th</sup>, Dr. Marie-Dominique EVEN (CNRS, France)