

Supervisor's Report on the Dissertation of Mgr. Rachel Mikos
“Ambiguity and Abstraction in Mongolian Riddles: An Ethnolinguistic Analysis”
submitted in 2020 at the Institute of Asian Studies, Faculty of Arts, Charles University

The present dissertation is the first attempt of interpretation of Mongolian riddles in the context of the nomadic worldview. The author has studied Mongolian, Tibetan and Czech at the Charles University. Besides, she is renown translator of Hungarian literature into English. She has also translated both classical and modern Mongolian poetry into English.

For her dissertation thesis Rachel Mikos chose an extremely interesting, but at the same time very difficult topic to grasp: first, because the riddles fix the way the members of nomadic culture enriched by the centuries long contacts with other cultures (Tibetan, Indian, Chinese, etc.) perceived the surrounding world, and expressed it with the help of the immense creativity of the Mongolian language; second, because riddling in Mongolia is no longer an actively live genre nowadays, many ties to the traditional culture have been broken as a result of “building the modern society” throughout the 20th century, that makes the fieldwork methods usually applied by the linguists for the research among the Mongolian speakers practically inapplicable.

Rachel Mikos submitted her dissertation based on two major riddle corpora (Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990 and Ölziikhutag 2013). It should be emphasized that the way the riddles are examined is innovative in its approach which combines ethno-linguistic methods with methods of textual analysis and inquiry into etymology. Except for two initial chapters focused on linguistic features of the language of the riddles (including morpho-syntactic ones, such as missing verb or copula, or lexical - ‘ruined’ words, etc.) the author examines the groups of riddles by the themes that (expressed directly or in a hidden way) link them together. In such a way she examines the riddle from the perspective of the “sacred” - Buddhism and indigenous believes of the Mongols - and “profane” (Chapter 3); movement and stillness (Chapter 4); spatiality (Chapter 7). The chapters about the riddles on fire (Chapter 5) and those that reveal how the micro- and macro-cosmos of Mongolian nomads is projected into the objects of daily life (Chapter 6) are especially worth mentioning.

Rachel Mikos has rich experience from the field: during her study she accomplished several field trips to Mongolia during which she collected material, interviewed consultants, discussed her topic with Mongolian experts and, most importantly gained insight into the nomadic culture. She was able to employ her observations, in addition to her experience with classical Mongolian literature, her command in the Tibetan language and above all - her profound knowledge of the Western literature related to the described topic.

Rachel Mikos examined the Mongolian riddles with the help of the Mongolian scholar educated in linguistics, but who, above all, comes from the genuine nomadic environment, and thus was able to assist with the unique insight to the nomadic culture, as well as the other informant, Mrs. Badamgarav did. Importantly, in her interpretation Rachel Mikos mostly relied on consultations with two uniquely knowledgeable native speakers. Both grew up the genuine and traditional nomadic environment and thus, were able to assist the author with their deep insight into the nomadic culture. One of them is, moreover a scholar educated in linguistics. It is worth mentioning that in order to obtain “extra view” Rachel Mikos did not hesitate to travel to Warsaw to interview Ragchaagiin Byambaa, a Buddhist monk and the lecturer at the Warsaw University. Many of the current interpretations grew out of interesting and inspiring discussions we held during our regular consultations.

Lastly, I appreciate the author’s effort to provide interlinear glosses to all examples of riddles used throughout her dissertation. I believe this not only renders the language of the riddles more transparent and accessible to Mongolists, but also makes the present work usable for linguists outside the Mongolian Studies.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize both the pioneering quality of the present work and its reliability: Formerly, there were attempts to classify Mongolian riddles but no deeper connection with the nomadic culture and ways of thinking have been mentioned. For Rachel Mikos her rich experience with translation of Mongolian and Hungarian poetry – which requires immersion into the world of the translated text and a painful interpretation work – was certainly an advantage. On the other hand, all her findings are based on careful consultant work and repeated checking of her interpretations.

If published, which I strongly recommend, the present dissertation will definitely make an important contribution to the international field of Mongolian Studies.

The doctoral thesis satisfies all of the prescribed requirements; I therefore recommend it for defence.

October 13th, 2020

Mgr. Veronika Kapišovská, Ph.D.
Institute of Asian Studies
Faculty of Arts, Charles University