I. Evaluation of master’s studies

Jan Židek has been attending my classes in Indo-European historical linguistics for the past four years, including courses on Tocharian and Germanic and seminars on Indo-European verbal, nominal, and pronominal morphology. He has consistently distinguished himself as a lively and inquisitive participant, frequently asking interesting questions during class and staying afterwards to discuss topics in greater depth, including potential research problems. He has also been an active member of the Institute for Comparative Linguistics, helping among other things with issues of digitalization and data storage thanks to his extensive computer background.

II. Overall evaluation of the master’s thesis

The thesis consists of four main chapters plus a conclusion and bibliography. The first chapter introduces the languages that are the focus of the thesis, namely Tocharian and Old and Middle Chinese, giving essential information about their writing systems, phonology, and historical evolution as well as the major reference works. The second chapter then discusses the methodology of the study, beginning with a review of the scholarship on borrowing in language contact and ending with a description of the computational approach developed by the author to aid in identifying possible Tocharian loanwords in Chinese.

The third chapter, the heart of the thesis, examines a list of alleged loanwords from Tocharian into Chinese collected from the few previous studies of the topic, in particular Lubotsky 1998 and the etymological dictionary of Adams (2013). In the great majority of instances, the author convincingly argues that there is little to no reason to uphold the hypothesis of a loan for phonological or chronological reasons and/or due to comparative evidence (i.e. the Middle Chinese word in question has cognates in other Sino-Tibetan languages) or more general patterns of language contact (e.g. the lexical item belongs to the core vocabulary or is otherwise unlikely to have been borrowed). Aside from a few very well-established cases such as ‘honey’ (49), very few potential Tocharianisms in Chinese stand up to closer scrutiny for one or more of these reasons; in particular, there seem as far as I can tell to be no examples at all attested in Old Chinese, so that ‘honey’ and other Tocharian loanwords would rather belong to a later period in the centuries around the Zeitwende, when there is universal agreement that the Tocharians were already established in Xinjiang. The discussion is impressive, displaying considerable familiarity with the fundamental major works on Chinese historical phonology, and will certainly
contain material of interest to scholars of Tocharian or Chinese, who usually know very little about the historical facts of the other language.

The results of the investigation are summarized in chapters 4 (Discussion) and 5 (Conclusion), which should have been combined as a single chapter. Despite the rather chaotic presentation, especially of chapter 4, the author states that the results are almost entirely negative, even with regard to particular semantic fields or Wanderwörter, though he does note in passing that intervocalic lenition of stops in Tocharian (for which the orthography offers only indirect evidence) might allow for more comparisons with Chinese (62). He does not rule out the possibility of prehistoric borrowings into Chinese from other Indo-European sources, but as the ancestors of the Tocharians were indisputably in the best position geographically and chronologically to come into contact with Chinese speakers, this does not seem altogether likely. Nevertheless, I cannot agree with the author that his findings are “depressing”, as such a robust negative conclusion will be of great significance for all those working on Chinese, Tocharian, and Indo-European languages, not to mention the prehistory of Eurasia.

III. Notes on the master’s thesis

None, though I have encouraged the author to consider revising the thesis for possible publication in a specialist journal.

IV. Additional questions for the defense

I think it would be a good idea to ask a questions about general principles and patterns of language contact, as these were discussed only briefly in section 2.1, without giving many examples. One might also wish to question the author more closely about the role of his “computer-assisted” method, as it was not always clear to me how this affected (or benefited) the study.

V. Conclusion

Jan Židek’s M.A. thesis is an important contribution to a topic which has gained much attention in recent years, prehistoric loanwords into and from Tocharian and their value for determining the prehistoric contacts of the Tocharian-speaking peoples. As one of the few young scholars who is familiar with the historical phonology of both Tocharian and Old/Middle
Chinese, he is in a unique position to evaluate the data with fresh, unprejudiced eyes. The (almost entirely negative) conclusions will be of great interest to scholars of both languages as well as neighboring disciplines, and mark a significant step in the ongoing research over prehistoric contacts between speakers of Tocharian and neighboring languages. I therefore recommend a grade of 1 for Jan Židek’s thesis, and also recommend that he be allowed to proceed to the oral defense.

Ronald Kim