

SOME CORRECTIONS TO TAYLOR'S MONGOLIAN RIDDLES

by John R. Krueger

The late Archer Taylor's work, "An Annotated Collection of Mongolian Riddles" (Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, n.s., vol. 44, part 3, pp. 317-425, 1954) deservedly ranks as the foremost treatment of riddles for any Altaic language up to now. He has gotten hold of rare and obscure collections, prepared translations (with the help of colleagues who translated the Mongolian riddles prior), and has given an especially good and detailed apparatus of references to the parallel riddles of many peoples. It would be difficult to improve on this collection with the present resources available.

Compelled as he was to rely on the work of others to translate correctly these brief, difficult and sometimes puzzling texts, in a rather unstudied language, he could do naught but believe the versions given him. Because the Russian translations contained unusual words (for items common in Mongolian daily life), and because confusions between other Russian words were made, a number of errors have occurred. I do not refer here to cases where one word might be better than another word; I mean mistaking one word for a totally different word, resulting in a wrong classification entirely. In addition, it is evident that several copies of the translations explain mistakes based on anticipations, on wrong spellings and of omissions.

Recently I had to read in the original, for other purposes, one of the major collections of Mongolian riddles, which forms a cornerstone of Taylor's work. This is Wl. Kotwicz's 310 Kalmyk-Mongolian riddles in his Kalmytskie zagadki i poslovitsy (St. Petersburg, 1905). It occurred to me to check my results against Taylor's version, in the hope of getting extra light on some hard spots. I found the level of accuracy to be generally high, about 90 percent, I would say, but the remaining 10 percent, perhaps some 20 or 30 items, contained very bad errors. Should folklorists cite these particular examples for their purposes, additional errors would arise. Therefore, in the interests of alerting present and future users of this work to be fact that there is a 10 percent error factor in Taylor's book (it is clear that no blame attaches to Taylor), I list these corrections.

Thus far I have been able to check the accuracy of only the Kotwicz section, but this item alone makes up nearly one-third of the Taylor book. The other items are so hard to locate (except for the French translation of Father Mostaert's Ordos riddles--where this sort of error will scarcely occur) that it must be left to a later time or to another person to re-check them.

To avoid cumbersome repetitions, in nearly every case I just give the new version as it should be, using Taylor's numbers throughout. Only corrections of substance, not of expression, are listed here and now.

Corrections and Remarks

107. "You cannot block the head of a pig" should read, "You cannot fasten a pig's head on with straps". i.e., the image is like the impossibility of tying a basketball to something with string.
196. "The motley ox straddles; the brindled ox rears up; the dock-tailed ox howled."
257. No tsepa-bird, but the tsen-bird, i.e., a swan, cygnet or storklet.
263. "Two mares are tied together, linked by a cangue-yoke."
311. Not a cat, but a bat.
- 336-b. Not a braid with a handle, but a "braid-handled whip".
- 336-c. "You cannot take a whip with a handle from a tamarisk-bush; you cannot teach a bay (horse)".
354. " . . . with two nails that resemble a vajra used in ritual and only one emissary. Tic-line, cord, pegs and mallet."
- 390-b. "Inside a big house there is a little house, inside it there is a fat yellow girl."
391. Not, "It is impossible to find out whether grandmother in the trunk is in a heap or a pit," but, "It is impossible to tell whether dice in the box are pitted-side up or bump-side up." The Russian word babka "die, dice" (referring to the sheep's anklebone dice used in Tibet and Mongolia) was mistaken for a diminutive of the Russian word baba "grandmother", here and elsewhere.
398. Not "logs", but "loops".
444. Not "grandmother" but "dice".
445. "A tall white gelong-monk sways morning and night." The gelong is the bhiksu or mendicant monk (bonze).
549. Not "logs at the unino", but "loops for the roff poles".
- 569-b. "Not "Dipper", but "Putting a dipper in boiling water."
575. Not "Vapors rising to the sun," but "mirage" (several occurrences, e.g., 693).
579. The word dobrotor should be read "from the Dörbets". The Dörbets are a certain major Mongolian tribe; the word was chosen to alliterate with dörben "four" (cf. No. 589).
586. Non "horse", but "horde" (the note on p. 300-b is correct).

589. The word gurbuts means "from the Gurbud tribe"; there is a footnote explaining it in the original which seems to have been overlooked. The word was chosen to alliterate with gurwan "three".

600. "Gelong-monk Erenjen warms his stomach; three novices warm their legs."

605. Read " . . . came with blood on the crown of his head". Answer: "Striking a flint."

620-a. Not "Five peasants", but "five young men".

644. The word raina means an aspen tree.

645. Not "scandalwood", but "sandalwood".

647. Not "on an imaginary tree", but "on a swaying tree."

655. "He broke off licorice-root in front of the image (burkhan). Snapping the main artery of a sheep."

658. Answer: "tumbleweed".

659. Answer: "the uvula".

670. Not a poppy, but a puppy.

784. Not "in place of the buggy of the rich man", but "on the rich man's home grounds".

786. Read "greasing the kettle".

787. "A golden saddle on a tree with many trunks."

810. "He took the gold and threw away the box. He ate the marrow and threw away the bones."

820-b. Not "cake of soap", but "whetstone".

846. Not "a golden ring", but "a golden saddle".

868, a, b, c. The alchik are the anklebone dice; for "hoop-net" read "dice".

903. Wrongly divided. "In the corner there is molten gold." Answer: "Wax in the ears; or, a fox."

990. Not Zunkhara, but Tsong-kha-pa, a major Buddhist figure and reformer.

1001. Not "red woolen belt", but "red saddle-thongs".

The preface (p. 319) contains the statement, "in all instances the original Mongolian text has been used as a basis for the translation offered here." This is simply not correct; an analysis of the errors shows clearly that they are due to confusion in the Russian words. The Kotwicz work is printed in the West-Mongolian (Oirat) script; apparently his major translator knew only the standard (eastern) script.