

## SCIENTIFIC REVIEW

by Professor Boyka Tsigova (Dr. Habil.), member of the scientific jury in the competition for the academic position “Professor” under professional field 2.1. Philology. (*Japanese literature and culture*), published in State Gazette, No 21 from 13. 03. 2020

For the applicant Associate Professor Gergana Rumenova Petkova, PhD

Associate professor Gergana Rumenova Petkova, PhD, is the only applicant in the open competition for the academic position of “Professor” under the field of 2.1 Philology (Japanese literature and culture).

From the submitted full dossier of documents it becomes evident that the applicant complies with all compulsory conditions and requirements under this competition. The filled-in reference (with the attached annexes under all criteria groups) confirms also the **compliance with the Minimal national requirements as of art. 2 of the Law for the development of the academic staff in the Republic of Bulgaria for scientific field 2. Humanitarian sciences, as well as with the additional requirements of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”.**

Associate professor Gergana Petkova has a remarkable academic biography for a university lecturer and researcher. According to her CV in 2004 she has successfully defended her PhD thesis on *Male Characters in the Japanese Fairy Tale: Classification and Analysis* in the University of Zurich, Switzerland. In 2005 the awarded PhD degree has been ascertained by the High Attestation Committee of Bulgaria (Attestation No 1288 – HAC), (HAC code 2.1. Philology: Literature of the peoples of America, Asia, Africa, Australia and Oceania). Mrs. Petkova was appointed at Sofia University in 2007. In 2008 she was appointed to the position of “chief assistant” in the major field of Japanology of the Department “Languages and cultures of Eastern Asia”. In 2012 she attained the academic title of Associate Professor in the same department and at present at the Department of Japanology of the Faculty of classical and modern philology of Sofia University.

At the Department of Japanology Assoc. Prof. G. Petkova has developed and teaches in total 12 subject courses under the curriculum of Japanology major. 8 of them comprise lecture courses for the Bachelor’s degree students and 4 – for the Master’s degree

students. She participates also in the teaching staff of the PhD course “Japanese language and culture” of the Faculty of classical and modern philology.

She has tutored three PhD students – two Bulgarian nationals and one foreign national. Two of them have successfully attained their degrees: Mrs. Evelina Hein at Sofia University, Faculty of classical and modern philology – in 2018 and Mrs. Dijana Nikodinovska at Skopje University – in 2015. The third one, Mrs. Maria Simeonova has been adopted on 01.02.2020 as regular doctorate student in field 2.1 Philology (Japanese literature and culture) at the Faculty of classical and modern philology.

Having long-time direct impressions from her research and scientific activities, I can confidently claim that Assoc. Prof. Gergana Petkova stands out with the qualities of professionally accomplished, competent and enterprising colleague. She is a lecturer with imagination and intuition, with which she impinges confidence and integrity among her students. Her merits as capable pedagogue are amplified by her excellent results in innovative teaching practices which add to the quality of Japanology education. Assoc. Prof. Petkova follows a specifically designed teaching strategy, aimed at qualitative knowledge acquisition by students of Japanese, olden Japanese, Ethnography, Classical Japanese literature and traditional Japanese culture. The efficiency of this strategy is due to a large degree to the applied new methods and modern forms of lecture and out-of-the-box practices. Ass. Prof. Petkova strives to engage the students with thematically arranged discussion formats, combines theory with suitable multi-media means, and initiates various interactive project tasks.

She organizes periodically surveys among the students to collect feed-back, comments and recommendations for the improvement of their education in the respective subject matter and in this way instils in them personal responsibility for the educational process and content. Apart from the acquisition of deep knowledge of Japanese language, literature and culture, her multifaceted teaching approach contributes to the cultivation of individual skills and team spirit of her students, so as they may utilize their full potential in the educational process and in the subsequent professional realization.

The increased interest among students towards the subjects she teaches confirms the success in obtaining meaningful results from the “conscious education”, which Assoc. Prof. Petkova presents as the key focus of her scientific activity.

**The monography “Conscious education. Models from the Bulgarian Japanology”** is the first and so far the only of its kind complex Japanese studies research in Bulgaria. The book has been published in 2020 and is submitted by Assoc. Prof. Petkova as the main dissertation research for the purposes of the current procedure.

The contents of the book are divided in two main parts, a conclusion, bibliography, 8 annexes and includes rich illustrative material. The main thesis of the research is the conscious adoption of the objectives of Japanese studies through prism of philological education. The research pursues two directions in line with the two-way model of the educational process. This has been achieved as the analyses of factors making students conscious of their educational purposes are interrelated with the analyses of those factors making teacher conscious of what effective education is.

The merits of the monography are manifest in several aspects.

The combination of various methodological approaches. According to Gergana Petkova the objective of the approach she designed and applied is to “combine the existing methods for theoretic and interactive (including hybrid) education with an array of targeted learning activities so as to consciously organize, absorb and practice the educational matter in constant connection with reality” (pp 10).

The conceptual platform of “conscious education” essence is laid out in the **first section** of the monography. From theoretical standpoint the analytical discourse demonstrates a multi-faceted and inter-disciplinary character. Within the overall theoretical framework of Petkova’s model the analyses are based on the tenets of research works by leading authors, with the involvement of certain ideas from Eastern philosophy and Zen Buddhist practices, relevant to the research thematic. On the basis of various scientific concepts, the study follows the logic of connectivity between objective and subjective factors with objective and subjective circumstances and facts. The theoretical conclusions throughout the discourse are always supported by examples from the teaching of Japanese language and culture at the Japanese studies department.

In the first section, as principally applicable to “conscious education” and Japanese studies, the motivational theory of human need hierarchy by Abraham Maslow has been put forward. Its core concept, the famous “Maslow pyramid” is applied as the vantage point from which to analyse the development of Japanese studies in Bulgaria in first three

decades since their establishment. As in the consequent sections, the findings and conclusions move from the common (in our case the “conscious education”) to the specific (Japanese studies). According to Assoc. Prof. Petkova “to be adequate to reality, conscious education must be in constant touch with this reality, while analysing the opportunities, the expectations, the needs and potential of all inter-related elements. In the case with Japanese studies this means conscious assessment of the options, expectations, needs and potential of students, lecturers, employers, educational milieu and societal context” (pp 15). I think that the incorporation of Maslow’s theory with a view to gaining awareness or realizing the objectives, tasks and effectiveness of education is an original approach, outlining a new study point for philology as professional field and of Japanese studies as a university department.

In the section “Darwin and the evolution of Japanese studies: history and perspectives” Petkova has also devised the original approach to use in comparative analysis element from the theory of Darwin on the origin of species. On the basis of his fundamental study “On the origin of species by means of natural selection, or the preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life”, 1859), the condition and perspectives of Bulgarian academic Japanese studies are examined through an interpretation of their development as a “species” from the “family” professional field of Philology. Here again the analysis is built from the common to the specific, with the variance that in this case the common is the philology and the specific – the Japanese studies.

The focus in the third section is the quality of training and forms of control in this process. Part of the section title is formed by the words “Here” and “Now”. The first word in the Bulgarian language is an abbreviation or acronym of “Total quality management” – the theory of Kaoru Ishikawa. The second word in the Bulgarian language is a smartly devised abbreviation, comprising of seminars, experiments, group discussions and inquiries” (pp 28, footnote 10). Petkova has used certain principles of the Japanese application of this theory, which in her opinion can be adapted to the realm of education “to address the challenges confronting foreign language learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in general and Japanese studies in particular, and to seek adequate working solutions to solve problems” (pp 29).

The coherent solutions proposed by Assoc. Prof. Petkova to improve the system are elucidated by her statement of the concrete difficulties, faced by the participants in the Jap-

anese studies educational process. She points out the effectiveness in the application of modern methods, of the project work, of the consciously embraced personal and team responsibility by both lecturers and students. Drawbacks and problem areas, however, are not sidelined in the research. The arguments bolstered by concrete examples in this section are constructed along the relation *common – specific – common* (here: foreign language learning – Japanese studies – “Conscious education”). The relation is completed by the conclusion: “Together we must think and make effort to improve the contents of the educational process itself, its fundamental objectives and use. Each participant in the process – lecturers and teachers, students and school kids, management organs, employers, family and society must be conscious of these needs and conscientiously tackle them” (pp 56).

The last section is devoted to the position of Assoc. Prof. Petkova as regards the reinvigoration of education through the prism of humanity’s wisdom, contained in Buddhist philosophy and in particular of Zen Buddhism. For analytical purposes use have been made of the studies of Alexander Simpkins on Zen and also of certain metaphorical contemplations by the founder of NO scenic art – Zeami Motokiyo. The significance of experience and spiritual readiness in the theory of conscious education are linked to the didactical aspects of Zeami’s teachings for the achievement of supreme acting skills, compiled in his treatise for the “flower” (in the theory of “hana” in the art of NO). On the one hand, citing the analogy with the natural life cycle of plants – from seed germination, through flowering and finally withering in order to rise again in the eternal cycle of life, Petkova reaches the conclusion that “this applies to both the knowledge that is taught/learned and to the participants in the process” (pp 57-58).

On the other hand, the analysis of experience and practice in education, of the format and content follows the Zen Buddhist concepts for the essence of educational process as condensed by Simpkins and Dewey. Attention is turned to the criteria for self-understanding, to the stages, techniques and steps to acquire knowledge and understand one’s potential, as well as for the knowledge about and the engagement with the surrounding world. In line with her concept for “conscious education” Petkova makes the finishing conclusion that “participation, awareness of oneself and of the surrounding world, the involvement in each situation as creative person, and not as sidelined observer and conse-

quently self-improvement in and through practice are equally valid for the educational philosophy of pedagogues like Dewy and Makarenko, and for Zen practices” (pp 74).

In the **second part** of the research the author presents an innovative approach to the application of the concept into the teaching practice through 5 real and concrete examples from the educational process in Japanese studies. She time and again substantiates her approach, as she is convinced that “only by experience and practice the individual may corroborate for oneself the theory and to identify with it, to see it through the lens of real life utilization and to extract back useful guidance to future developments” (pp 67). Or said otherwise, thus one may achieve “conscious education” and would realize her main principles in the educational practice.

Apart from the profound theoretical argumentation the research of Assoc. Prof. Petkova reveals that Japanese studies and more specifically the Japanese studies subject is a living organism. This allusion is reinforced by fact that the conceptual core – “conscious education” is “alive” with concrete examples from real life Japanese studies practices. In line of thought I would add that the choice of theories in each section of the first part of the research is quite purposeful. They act like facets that consequentially add up and cultivate the living image of Japanese studies. In the first section: the needs theory underlines the emergence and the development conditions for Japanese studies; in the second section: the theory of the origin of species outlines the survival – as adaptation to contemporary conditions along each stage of Japanese studies existence; in the third section – as the road map to improve; in the fourth section: the spiritual aspect of Zen practices is contemplated as the *raison d’etre* for self-knowledge and self-determination of the living Japanese studies organism in the sphere of education. Probably, this was not exactly the initial intention of the author, but according to me such an interpretation is not inimical to the core idea of the research. It is not accidental that the book appears in 2020 – a jubilee year for the Japanese studies specialty, on the eve of its 30<sup>th</sup> year.

The bibliography of the monograph comprises works by Bulgarian, Japanese, Russian, American and European scientists and researchers. The sources of the quoted scientific research are in the Bulgarian, English, Japanese and Russian languages.

Assoc. Prof. Gergana Petkova is a Bulgarian Japanologist, who is well known in the research community in our country and abroad. The 27 publications listed under the cur-

rent competition are in the Bulgarian, English, Russian and Japanese languages. Apart from the current monograph, the publications include two chapters from collective monograph publications, one tutorial book, studies and articles in scientific magazines and proceedings of research conferences, as well as introductory pieces in specialized publications. 11 of these have been proof read and have prestigious international references: 3 – in Web of Science/Scopus; 7 – in CiNii and so forth: (Zentralblatt, MathSciNet, DBLP, ERIC, ACM Digital, PИИЛ), while 7 are registered in the National reference registrar.

The general profile of the research works of Assoc. Prof. Gergana Petkova shows that her scientific interests are focused on the culturological study of classical Japanese literature, teaching of Japanese and classical Japanese languages, ethnography of Japan and Japanese folklore. Her monograph, as well as each of the rest of her publications add to and enrich the Japanology research in Bulgaria. Each publication has valuable research conceptions, substantiated by precise scientific arguments and are proof for accumulated research experience and creative maturity.

In the period 2013-2020 Assoc. Prof. Petkova has taken part in 17 scientific conferences, national and international forums in Bulgaria, Japan, Russia and other European countries. She has participated in the organization of 7 international conferences, of which she chaired 3. She has also been a member of the organizational committee of the annual conference of the European association of Japanese resource specialists – 2019. In the same period she has managed 9 prestigious research projects: 3 national (in 2016 and 2019 - under contracts between the Fund for Scientific Research and Sofia University and in 2014 – under contract with the Mitsubishi Corporation) and 6 international (2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2019 and 2020) financed by the Japan Foundation.

Since 2009 she has been a member of 4 prominent international organizations: European Association for Japanese Studies (2009+), International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (2014+), International Society of Ethnology and Folklore (2015+), Japan Anthropology Workshop (2016+).

Owing to her qualities as scientist and her capability to achieve the optimum balance between personal ambitions in the professional field and strong motivation for team work in academic and organizational matters Assoc. Prof. Petkova is highly esteemed in the Department and well respected in the wider academic circles.

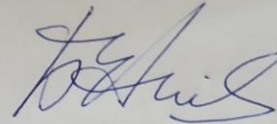
In 2019 she was honored with the Award of the Ambassador of Japan for her contribution to teaching and research on Japanese language and culture.

My recommendation to her is to keep her course and in the same industrious and successful manner to advance the interests of the Japanese studies department of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski".

**In conclusion:** The enumerated scientific, theoretical and methodological merits of her publications, her successful teaching practice and professional qualities as out-standing Japanologist give me adequate justification to recommend persuasively to honourable jury and the Faculty of classical and new philology that Assoc. Prof. Gergana Rumenova Petkova be voted as Professor of Japanese literature and culture.

25. 08. 2020

Reviewer:



/Professor Boyka Tsigova, Dr HAbil/