

OPINION

by Assoc. Prof. **Iskra Gencheva Mandova**, PhD,
Department of Classical and Eastern Languages and Cultures,
Faculty of Modern Languages,
St Cyril and St Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo,
Member of the scholarly panel (Order of the Rector of SU № RD-38-306 / 23.06.2025)

concerning the dissertation of Maria Tinkova Marinova,
Chinese Studies Department,
Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology,
Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”

on the topic:

STRATEGY AND DIPLOMACY OF EMPEROR HAN WUDI (141-87 BC) IN CENTRAL
ASIA THROUGH THE PRISM OF THE “CHRONICLE OF DAYUAN” FROM THE
“RECORDS OF THE HISTORIAN”

(Dissertation Supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Evgenii Kandilarov)

For obtaining educational and scientific degree “Doctor” (PhD) in professional field 2.1.
Philology, Scientific specialty: Languages of the peoples of Asia, Africa and America
(Chinese language, history and culture)

1. Information about the procedure

Maria Tinkova Marinova was enrolled as a doctoral student at the Chinese Studies Department at the Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology of “St. Kliment Ohridski” University of Sofia since 01.10.2021 by order of the rector No. ПД 20-1812/ 23.09.2021, and finished her studies with the right of defense on 01.10.2024. From the documents presented, it is evident that in accordance with the approved individual plan, the doctoral student gained more than 203 credits provided in the curriculum, namely 247 credits, and successfully passed 1 exam in History of China during Western Han dynasty.

The prepared documentation that I have access to as a member of the scholarly panel is precise and informative, including a report for originality and authorship of the dissertation.

The scholarly panel was determined in compliance with deadlines, quotas and professional competences of the members.

2. Information about the PhD student

Maria Tinkova Marinova graduated from Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” in 2001, and during her studies she specialized at Beijing Normal University for a period of one year.

Since her graduation, Maria Marinova has worked as a freelance translator, and in the period from 2003 to 2016 she was a full-time assistant professor in Chinese language at the Department of “Classical and Eastern Languages and Cultures” at the University of Veliko Tarnovo, from 2005 to 2017 she was a part-time lecturer at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, and since 2017 she has been elected a full-time assistant professor at the Department of Chinese Studies at Sofia University. She teaches the disciplines “Chinese Phonetics and Phonology”, “Chinese Dialectology”, “Modern History of China” and “Specialized Translation – Economics, Law, IT” in the bachelor and master degree programs of Sofia University. For more than 15 years, she has been the executive editor of the Confucius Institute magazine, editor and compiler of the proceedings of the Silk Road scientific conference. She has specialized repeatedly in the PRC: Lanzhou (2024), Xi'an (2019), Beijing (2018), participated in a series of trainings for Chinese language teachers from Central and Eastern Europe at the Confucius Institute at the Eötvös Loránd University – Budapest.

Maria Marinova has been a member of the European Association for Chinese Studies (EACS) since 2015, of the European Association for Asian Art and Archaeology (EAAA) since 2019 and of the Bulgarian Association of Sinologists since 2024. She is fluent in Chinese, English and Russian.

The doctoral student presents more than the required number of publications on the topic of the dissertation.

3. Information about the dissertation and the summary

The dissertation consists of an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, appendices and bibliography in English, Bulgarian, Chinese and Russian.

The total volume of the dissertation is 202 computer pages, of which 138 pages text, 21 pages of bibliography, 35 pages of translation of “Chronicle of Dayuan” and 8 pages of other appendices.

In the introduction the topicality and the need of scientific research are commented, the object, subject, aim, objectives, hypothesis, resources and methodology of the dissertation are defined. The structure, research methods and approaches, contributions and significance of the work are presented.

The first chapter, entitled “Analysis of the problem and the state of research in the scientific field”, examines the current status of scientific research in various aspects, related to the topic of the dissertation. The first part includes a review of the primary sources, covering mainly Chinese historiographical texts, including “Records of the Historian”, “History of the Han Dynasty”, “Book of the Late Han Dynasty”, “Book of Documents”, “Zuo Zhuan”, “Discourses of the States”, etc. The second part provides a critical review of the secondary sources, divided in two directions – philological and historical, and the third part evaluates the existing approaches, outlining the main scientific paradigms and unresolved issues in the dissertation area.

In Chapter Two the historical context in which Emperor Wu-di's foreign policy developed is discussed. The first part traces the formation of the state structure and administration of the Western Han Dynasty, which remained fundamental for the development of Chinese statehood over the next two millennia. The second part analyzes the domestic political, administrative, and economic reforms carried out during Emperor Wu-di's reign, which created favorable conditions for conducting an active foreign policy and territorial expansion of the empire. The third part is devoted to diplomatic subjects in the pre-Han period and in the era of the Western Han Dynasty. A systematic review of a number of state formations and tribal alliances in the immediate vicinity of the Han Empire is made, clarifying their ethnic characteristics, regional specificities, and role in the geopolitical dynamics of the region.

The third chapter constitutes the main part of the dissertation and offers an in-depth analysis of Emperor Wu-di's foreign policy strategies, based on the information from the “Chronicles of Dayuan” in “Records of the Historian” by Sima Qian. The emphasis is placed on the transition from peaceful diplomacy to military expansion, as well as on the innovative historiographical approach that goes beyond traditional Sino centrism. The main instruments of cultural and diplomatic influence are the imperial audiences, tributary system, diplomatic missions, dynasty marriages, and the exchange of guarantees.

Maria Marinova concludes that the foreign policy of the Han court during the period can be successfully defined with modern terms such as “pragmatic realism”, “hybrid politics” or “intelligent power”, as it combines elements of both diplomacy and coercion.

The appendices complement the main research through an original translation of the “Chronicles of Dayuan” from ancient Chinese into Bulgarian, with maps illustrating the geopolitical situation in Central Asia in the 2nd century BC, and tables with demographic and political data for the Western kingdoms extracted from dynasty chronicles.

The proposed text demonstrates Maria Marinova’s in-depth training in the field of Chinese language, history and culture, as well as the issues related to the topic of the study.

The abstract (44 computer pages in total) objectively reflects the content of the dissertation work and the author’s contributions.

The topic of the proposed dissertation is attractive, relevant, disputable and belongs to the so-called interdisciplinary topics, as it concerns various processes and factors that influenced the formation of the politics and diplomacy of the Western Han Dynasty. The object and methods of the study are formulated precisely, and the goals and objectives have been achieved.

4. Scholarly Contributions

One of the main contributions of the dissertation work, of course, is the translation of original source material from ancient Chinese, which can give impetus to other subsequent scientific research. The research is done in a multi-layered, broad-spectrum and interdisciplinary manner. The dissertation represents the first systematic study in Bulgaria of the early diplomatic instruments that emerged before the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC – 9 AD), as well as their development during the reign of Emperor Wu-di.

As a contribution, I would also distinguish the clarification of a rich set of terminology integrated into the historical narrative, covering numerous toponyms, cultural and political realities. The work has a pioneering character and can pave the way for future research in the field of history, historiography, cultural studies, diplomacy, etc., which is why I highly recommend its publication.

Of course, the dissertation is evidence and a contribution to the development of Bulgarian Sinology.

5. CONCLUSION

The presented doctoral dissertation is an original scientific research that shows the achievements of the doctoral candidate Maria Marinova, her knowledge and skills for a

serious comparative and interdisciplinary analysis of the studied topic. The work fully meets the requirements for independent scientific research.

Based on the above, I propose that the dissertation work be evaluated on its merits, and that its author be awarded the scientific and educational degree "Doctor".

July 26, 2025

Veliko Tarnovo

Author of the opinion:

(Assoc. Prof. Iskra Mandova, PhD)