

# Introduction

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**Aim of the Textbook:** This textbook is designed for individuals interested in learning the Classical Mongolian script. Prior knowledge of the modern Mongolian language and the Cyrillic alphabet is not required for those wishing to use this resource. It is important to note that this book does not instruct on the Cyrillic script, which is used for the modern Mongolian language, the official language of Mongolia.

Throughout this book, learners will acquire a comprehensive understanding of the fundamental principles of orthography, commencing with the alphabet and extending to related grammatical concepts. It should be emphasized that this textbook does not aim to delve deeply into linguistic and phonetic aspects but is primarily focused on facilitating the acquisition of the Classical script in a clear and accessible manner. Consequently, students are expected to progress independently, and upon completing the textbook, they should be proficient in reading and writing. Furthermore, the content of the textbook imparts valuable insights into the history, culture, customs, and folklore of Mongolians residing in Mongolia, the Russian Federation, and the People’s Republic of China.

**History of the Classical Mongolian Script:** The Classical script has been referred to by various names: the Uyghur script, the Uyghur Mongolian script, the Khudam script, the Old script, the Old Mongolian script, the Vertical Mongolian script, the Mongolian script, and the National script. Historically, it has played a significant role in the history and intellectual culture of Mongolians. A debate among researchers persists regarding the initial adoption of this script by Mongolians. Most scholars contend that Mongolians officially adopted the script no later than 1204, likely under the directive of Chinggis Khan.<sup>1</sup> However, some scholars, such as Ts. Shagdarsuren and Ch. Chuluunbaatar, maintain a different perspective, arguing that “it is highly doubtful that the Mongolians borrowed the script of Sogdian origin from the Uyghurs, whose empire had already declined, and utilized it in the 13th century. Instead, it is more plausible that during the rise of the Uyghurs, the Mongolians might have acquired the script from them for own use.”<sup>2</sup>

The Uyghur Empire, which existed for over a hundred years between the 8th and 9th centuries within the territory of present-day Mongolia, united ethnically diverse tribes. During this time, they adopted the Sogdian script of Aramaic origin and adapted it to their own language, making it their official script. In the course of this adaptation, it is likely that a few literate individuals from the nomadic Mongolian tribes, who were under the rule of the Uyghur Empire, used this script for official purposes. After the Uyghur Empire disintegrated, the nobility of the nomadic Mongolian tribes within its former territory may have continued to employ the Uyghur script for their official duties. Later, when Chinggis Khan unified all the Mongolian tribes and established the Mongol Empire, he likely declared the Uyghur script as the official script of his empire. Notably, the capital of the Mongol Empire, Karakorum, was founded just 25 kilometers from the ruins of Karabalghasun, the capital of the Uyghur Empire. To this day, the earliest surviving relic of this script in the Mongolian language is the Stele of Chinggis Khan, dating back to 1224–1225.

Since that time, as the Mongolian language has developed and evolved, the ancient script has also undergone linguistic changes. Mongolians have employed the script to compose scriptures and works encompassing topics such as history, culture, religion, and science, including translations of foreign texts, many of which have been preserved until the present day. Until the early 20th century, it was the official script of Mongolia and remained as such until the end of World War II despite a brief attempt at using the Latin alphabet between 1930 and 1932.

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1 Rybatzki 2011: 204.

2 Ts. Shagdarsuren and Ch. Chuluunbaatar presented this view at the International Congress of Mongolian Studies, held in Ulaanbaatar in August 2023.

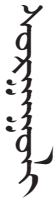


**Image 1:** *Stele of Chinggis Khan, Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia. Photo by Ganchimeg Altangerel, 2018.*

Influenced by the Soviet Union, the Cyrillic alphabet was then adopted in 1946. Consequently, all historical documents and books stored in the Archives of Mongolia prior to this time were written in the old script.

However, since 1990, with its reintroduction into the school curricula, the Classical script has seen a resurgence within Mongolian society. In 2015, the Mongolian government designated it as “The National script” to distinguish it from the Cyrillic script, and later a decree was issued to conduct all official affairs using a combination of the National script and the Cyrillic script, starting from 2025. Now known as “The Mongolian script,” it has gained widespread popularity within society and continues to grow. There is a nationwide movement aimed at teaching it to adults, with both public and private organizations providing training and courses for their employees. Currently, students in middle and high schools study the script using “Үндэсний бичиг VI” (The National Script textbook) two hours a week, beginning in the 6th grade and continuing until the end of the 12th grade. This growing interest among children and young people in both calligraphy and digital writing has resulted in more demand for calligraphy lessons. Calligraphy competitions for children and adults are also regularly conducted each year.

The path of the Classical script did not follow the same course in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of China. Mongolians residing there have maintained the use of the Classical script in their daily lives continuously for centuries. Between 1955 and 1958, they temporarily adopted “The New Script Cyrillic” for a brief period. Until September 2020, the Mongolian language and the Classical Mongolian script held the status of the second official language and script, following the Chinese language, and thus, Mongolian children were taught subjects such as Mongolian language, script, literature, and history in their native language. However, starting in the fall of 2020, this status was officially revoked as part of a new school policy introduced by the government of China within Inner Mongolia’s education system. Presently, Mongolian school students dedicate 40 minutes two or five days each week depending on the administrative region to learning their native language.

**The Peculiarity of the Classical Mongolian Script:** Scholars concur that the script, adapted from that of the Uyghurs, was originally designed for the spoken language of Mongolians of that era. After undergoing significant changes in its evolution, the modern Mongolian spoken language now differs from the written script. For instance, while modern Mongolian and the Cyrillic script exhibit marked differences from the old written script, some local dialects in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region bear a closer resemblance to this historical script. As an illustration, the word school is written as  'surγayuli' in the Classical script, whereas in Cyrillic, it is written as 'surquul' or [сургууль].

All letters in the Classical script are written from top to bottom. Consecutive consonants do not appear within a single word, and if they do, they must be flanked by vowels on either side. The script possesses the capacity to accommodate various local dialects of the Mongolian language in written form. In essence, dissimilar sounds are represented by a single grapheme. Depending on the distinct local dialects spoken, certain letters and syllables are written the same, but their pronunciation varies when read out. For example, the word tall [өндөр] may be pronounced as 'öndür' or 'ündür,' while the word hard [хатуу] may be pronounced as 'qatayū' and 'γatayū.' These variations afford the opportunity to read and pronounce the local dialects of the Khalkh, Buryat, Western Mongolians, and many more.<sup>3</sup>

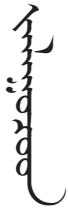
**Structure of the Textbook and Its Use:** This book differs from others in its didactic approach. Modern references have been inspired by my own experience of teaching language classes and mindful exchanges with my students have shaped the book's content. Many inquisitive questions from them about the other Mongolians living in China and Russia moved me to present this topic as extensively as possible in this book. This book also aims to tackle common difficulties foreign students experience in understanding grammatical rules. For example, in the lesson on Verb Conjugation, learners will study the present tense suffixes separately from the future tense suffixes for clarity, in contrast to the traditional presentation of this grammar point.

In the beginning, learners will become acquainted with the basic features of writing and the structure of sentences in Mongolian, using the term the Classical Mongolian script, as it is already called in English. All lessons containing grammatical features consist of the following components: Grammar, Writing, Examples, Reading and Writing, and Note. The grammar section elucidates the primary rules of each letter and grammar point. The writing section provides an in-depth explanation of how to write the letters and graphemes, including crucial points to emphasize during the writing process. In the examples section, learners should write the newly acquired letters into words, or write the example words with the new grammar. The reading and writing section presents example sentences, requiring learners to read these sentences with the newly learned words and subsequently transcribe them into a notebook. Finally, each note highlights all essential points related to a lesson's content.

When selecting example words and sentences, I carefully considered contemporary and engaging topics, aiming to make the content as relevant to daily life and usage as possible. The example words and sentences are initially presented in the Classical script, followed by their transliteration and Cyrillic versions. Under each word and sentence, the English translations are provided. For those who can read the Cyrillic script, it is enclosed in square brackets. This additional notation can aid in expediting the process of learning to write in the Classical script. For example,

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3 Ц. Шагдарсүрэн 2001: 38.



ялагуучид

[залуучууд]

young people

The textbook includes many additional worthwhile lessons. In “Diverse Writing Styles in the Classical Script,” various forms of the art of writing encompassing calligraphy are presented. The subsequent lesson showcases the technological evolution of the script and exemplifies different fonts. It also provides an insight into reading block letters and discerning their differences from the handwritten cursive forms. The lesson “Independent Reading and Writing” presents an engaging selection of songs, poems, epics, and children’s games as representative samples of the oral literature of the Buryat, Kalmyk, Oirat, Barga, Khalkh, and Upper-Mongolians residing in Mongolia, China, and Russia. These materials highlight the unique characteristics of their diverse Mongolian dialects and oral literary traditions. Young scholars will find that this lesson encompasses an archival document along with its transliteration, and for individuals interested in digital writing with the script, the subsequent lesson provides detailed explanations.

For those who desire more real-world examples of Mongolian, additional resources can be found towards the end of the book, including a list of websites housing Mongolian collections with manuscripts and historical materials written in the Classical script. These invaluable resources are curated in libraries and archives across numerous countries. Additionally, there is information about electronic newspapers that feature news in the Classical script and various social media applications. These platforms offer dictionaries, songs, poems, oral texts, and more, all with a brief introduction. I hope that these tools will prove beneficial for individuals interested not only in staying informed and enjoying cultural content but also in honing their skills in the Classical script independently, thus advancing their proficiency.

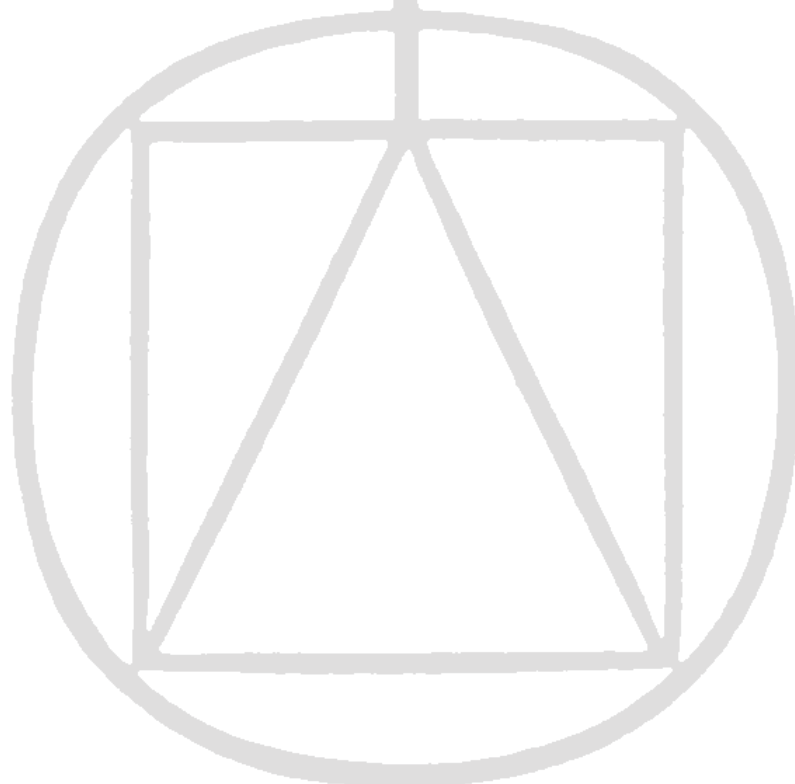
**On Transliteration:** In this book, the vowels *o* [o] and *ö* [ø], entering in the second period of the words in the Classical script, are transliterated by using the vowels *u* [y] and *ü* [y̥]. These include *монгол* [монгол] ‘Mongolian’ and *нөхөд* [нөхөд] ‘friends,’ and so on. This follows the widely used transliteration rule in academic papers. The names of foreigners, especially German names, are written into the Classical script in accordance with their original spelling and pronunciation in their native language. For example, *таня* [Таня] Tanja, *флориан* [Флориан] Florian, *михаэла* [Михаела] Michaela, and so on.

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Ganchimeg Altangerel



# Transliteration and Letters of the Classical Mongolian Script

In the realm of Latinized transcription for the Classical Mongolian script, several transliteration systems are in active use. Distinguished scholars, including Nicholas Poppe, Lajos Ligeti, Sharavyn Choimaa, Tsevelijn Shagdar-suren, Rita Kullmann, and Dandii-Yadamyn Tserenpil, have diligently systematized these transliteration methods in their scholarly works, often in conjunction with their instruction on the Classical Mongolian script. These systems exhibit nuanced differences among them. When transliterating old books, manuscripts such as religious or philosophical texts, and archival documents for research purposes, scholars from various national traditions of Mongolian studies primarily rely on the transliteration systems of Nicholas Poppe and Lajos Ligeti.

However, some transliteration systems, such as Nicholas Poppe's, employ identical or duplicated letters to represent certain characters. This can cause confusion for foreigners who are unfamiliar with the Mongolian language and are in the early stages of learning the Classical script. The letters are the *q* [xa, xo, xy] and *k* [xə, xø, xy] in words from the original Mongolian language, also the *h* [x] in words from foreign language, and the *lh* [lx] in words from the Tibetan language. Therefore, in this textbook, the letter [lx] in words from Tibetan is indicated only using the double letter *lh*, and all others are indicated with help of a single letter.

In the following table, a comparative examination is conducted between the Latin transliteration, the Classical Mongolian script, and the Cyrillic alphabet of the contemporary Mongolian language. The letters are categorized into vowels and consonants used in the words of original Mongolian language, as well as those utilized for writing foreign words.

The Classical script is distinguished by its utilization in three distinct forms: initial, medial, and final positions within a word. The subsequent table illustrates these three forms of the letters, with empty cells signifying their non-occurrence.

	Transliteration	Classical Mongolian Script	Cyrillic Mongolian Alphabet	
1	<i>a</i>	ᠠ	[A, a]	Vowels
		ᠡ		
		ᠢ ᠣ ᠤ		
2	<i>o</i>	ᠨ	[O, o]	
		ᠯ		
		ᠪ		

	Transliteration	Classical Mongolian Script	Cyrillic Mongolian Alphabet	
3	u	ᠠ	[ʏ, y]	Vowels
		ᠡ		
		ᠢ		
4	e	ᠣ	[ɛ, ə]	
		ᠤ		
		ᠥ		
		ᠦ		
5	ö	ᠦ	[ø, œ]	
		ᠦ		
		ᠦ		
6	ü	ᠦ	[y, ʏ]	
		ᠦ		
		ᠦ		
7	i	ᠦ	[ɪ, ɨ]	
		ᠦ		
		ᠦ		