



# The Influence of the Sumdag on Traditional Mongolian Language and Dharma Literature

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## Abstract

Traditional Mongolian Language evolved through the history taking in its purview the Buddha's teaching of the Dharma through the route of the Tibetan language. This research study examined the chronology of the evolution of the Mongolian language and literature, the influence of Tibetan on its grammar and on the written Mongolian. The focus of the study was however on the creation of a written Mongolian language based on the translations of the ten sutras of knowledge of the Tripitaka and the words of foreign origin borrowed from Sanskrit and Tibetan into Mongolian. The findings revealed that the Mongolian grammar, often compared with the content of Sumju, was influenced by the primary grammar of Tibetan and Ogtorgui Maani, the main grammar of written Mongolian. The study also revealed that *Sumdag* which comprised two sutras, *Sumju* and *Dagjug*, assisted in the translations of the Buddhist scriptures into Tibetan and Mongolian languages. The *Sumdag* also enriched the Mongolian vocabulary by classification of vowels and consonants; and revived the grammar of ancient texts by developing new grammatical terminology and definitions. This study would provide useful insights to linguists, teachers and students about the influence of *Sumdag* on Traditional Mongolian Language and Dharma Literature.

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**Keywords:** Mongolian grammar, Tibetan, Ogtorguin Maani, sumju, sutras, Buddhism.

## Introduction

Traditional Mongolian Language traces its origin in the Mongol Empire of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, often referred to as "the Mongol language" (Harris, Sanders, Lattimore, & The Editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2023). The language was believed to have connections with other contemporary languages like Turkic, Tungusic, Korean and Japonic languages, but comparative linguists have refuted this view, though all these languages are grouped under the Altaic language family area (Clouston, 1956). Prior to the adoption of the Old Uyghur alphabet in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Mongolian was an unwritten language. Until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, however, this alphabet was used largely for official purposes while literary output was very less. About 2,600 years ago, not long after the Buddha's teaching flourished in India, Mongolia received the Dharma (teachings of the Buddha) via a transition route around the west of the Himalayas, followed by two more transitions, one around the west and another via Tibet. Though traces of these transitions are not abundant, we have ample evidence to understand the evolution of the Mongolian language. For instance, due to the influence of the now extinct Khitan language, in the transition, several changes were noticed such as a major shift in the vowel-

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harmony, development of long vowels change in the case system, and restructuring of the verbal system (Clauson, 1956; Harris et al., 2023).

Dharma is primarily a Buddhist concept that refers to a law or principle governing the universe. It is a law of righteousness and satya (truth), which regulates individuals to follow customs and adopt ethical behavior in accordance with Dharma. The Dharma literature mainly comprises Buddhist teachings and practices. Like any other holy book, the Buddhadharmas also emphasized the law of universal truth and path to salvation to overcome suffering (duhkha) and escape from this *nashwar samsara* or the mortal world. The Dharma is also one of the three jewels of Buddhism, besides *sangha* and *buddha*, which pave the path to enlightenment.

The Mongols who had previously been orally passing down stories, myths and other kinds of folklore now had an academic language, and the Dharma Literature entered into their mindset, influencing their intellect and wisdom (Damdinsuren, 1982). Buddhism became the official religion and several Dharma literatures were translated into Tibetan, which soon became the language of the Buddhist scriptures. These translations provided an opportunity to the educated Mongol tulkus and lamas to read and understand the Buddhist works and express their views and theories in Tibetan (Enkhbayar, 2020; Wallace, 2008, 2020).

The Tibetan Sage Tomi Samboda, who went to South India at royal decree in the 8th and 9th centuries, conducted extensive studies of Indian writings, on the basis of which he created an alphabet and grammar of Tibetan in eight volumes (Grønbech & Krueger, 1993). Most of these have been lost over the centuries and today all that survive are the *Sumju* ("Thirtieth", *Guchit* in Mongolian translation) and *Dagjug* ("Symbolic writings", *Temdegiin orlogo* in Mongolian translation), together known as the *Sumdag* (Khurelbaatar, 2002). *Sumdag* is thus an abbreviated combination of two sutras name *Sumju* and *Dagjug* or thirtieth symbolic writings. *Sumdag* has contributed to the Mongolian written language in several ways. First, the two sutras assisted in the translations of religious treatises into Tibetan (Gribkova, 2020), which soon came to be recognized as the Buddhist scriptural language (Enkhbayar, 2020). Secondly, the *sumdag* enriched the Mongolian vocabulary by classification of vowels and consonants. Lastly, *sumdag* revived the grammar of ancient texts by developing new grammatical terminology and definitions (Gribkova, 2020; Grønbech & Krueger, 1993).

By examining historical findings, one question emerges: what was the basis on which literary Mongolian was created? Clearly it is not to European languages that we must look. Rather, the answer lies in the grammarians of Tibet, whose roots can be traced back to the Indian grammarian Pāṇini (पाणिनि). This paper, therefore, explored the role that the Dharma Literature following the Tibetan Buddhism, especially Tibetan grammar as described in the *Sumdag*, played a significant role in the development of Mongolian as a literary language.

## Methodology

A linguistics research study with a historical and analytical approach requires a qualitative and lexicosemantic research design. This study employed this approach to generate both description and interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2016) to narrate the Mongolian language influenced by numerous forces in its evolution, particularly the influence of the *Sumdag* on traditional Mongolian language and dharma literature. The descriptive approach also enabled to identify and describe the key past events that influenced the development of the Mongolian language and marked influences on its literature. The narrative sequence is accepted for narrating "what happened [and] understood as a sequence of occurrences" (Lemon, 2003). Finally, the analytical method necessitated the researcher to view the past events in their entirety and their influence in the present (Lemon, 2003).

This descriptive-narrative-analytical method proved useful in the study of the evolution and importance of the Mongolian literature. This trio approach not only helped to describe the available Mongolian texts such as poetry, epics, myths, and historical writings, but also made it possible to introduce modern narrating key elements to understand and analyze those texts. This led to make a fair analysis of the role and contribution of the Mongolian language and the extent to which it is legitimized to say that it was influenced by the socio-cultural and political development taking place across centuries.

A qualitative research study also seeks to establish a relationship between language testing and information processing (Tetnowski & Damico, 2001) and the planning and interpreting of language assessments (Mohajan, 2018). This study also used a semiotic approach (Sherman, 2021) in understanding the Mongolian alphabets and the numerals written in Cyrillic script and translations from Tibetan and Turkic languages (Enkhbayar, 2020; Zhang & Zhang, 2018) which used mostly alliterative and symbolic language.

The data was collected from archives, translations, and library books with different contexts, where each source represented a different degree of relevance to linguistic terms. The data was analyzed with a historic-analytical approach keeping in view the modern and current prevalence of the Mongolian language.

## Literature Review

- *The evolution of the Mongolian culture and language*

The Mongolian culture was much influenced by the Tibetan, Chinese and central Asian cultures. The Mongols were a nomadic tribe, herding livestock like horses, camels, sheep, and cattle for their milk, meat, wool, etc. They were initially followers of shamanism and worshipped tribal gods but later embraced Buddhism (Wallace, 2008, 2020). Traditionally, Mongolia was aristocratic and hierarchical; however, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, under the Soviet influence, it adopted republican form of government. The democratic revolution of 1990 helped Mongolia to become a stable market democracy, adopting privatization and globalization as national policies. The impact of education also led to eliminating superstitious and feudal customs, abolishing the Buddhist *sangha* (clergy) and encouraging trades like mining, farming and prioritizing the development of the Mongolian economy through science and technology.

The evolution of the Mongolian language began in the 13<sup>th</sup> century when Mongolian used the Uyghur script, also known as Classical Mongolian Script, the only script in the world written vertically and left to right (See Figure 1). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the use of new alphabets and numerals, Mongolian was written with a Latin based script or the Russian Cyrillic script which is still used today (Srba, 2020) (See Figure 1). However, the Classical Mongolian Script with its traditional calligraphy was restricted to inner region neighboring China.



Figure 1. Mongolian Script and Mongolian alphabets & Numerals

Halperin (2000) considered a Mongolian text to be oral rather than written, and which must be recited instead of read. Owing to the illiteracy of the time, book could not be read by a majority of Mongols under Genghis Khan; only a few Mongols could write in Uighur. It was only the Yuan dynasty that preserved the Mongolian historical texts, while the Ilkhanates who were in power could not have the access its writings due to many reason, literacy being one of them. It is implied here that the content of the Mongolian literature was exclusive known to only the literate Mongols, who were able to read as most of the literary sources were epics, legends, folklore, and genealogies (Halperin, 2000).

- *Dharma ideology and Mongolian Literature*

The word 'Dharma' is derived from Sanskrit which refers to a universal law, righteous living, socially and morally good qualities, and living in a humanitarian, value based society. Most of these values are the Buddha's teachings and a part of the Dharma literature. Keeping this in mind, therefore, one can conclude that the dharma ideology encompasses everything that was taught by the Buddha. The Dharma literature is therefore a canonical collection of texts, referred to as tantras, which describes the doctrines and practices of Buddhism (Wallace, 2008, 2020). Linguistically, *dharma* is translated as a law or a doctrine, teaching, duty, and good qualities, but no single English word adequately conveys its real meanings. When used to refer to the Buddha's teaching, it talks about the elements of human existence and Buddhist religious practices (Keown, 2007), about early Buddhist doctrines and dharma theory (Harvey, 1993, 2000, 2012; Horsch, 2004) and about developing a kind of Buddhist theology (Jackson & Makransky, 2013).

The Mongolian literature until the 16<sup>th</sup> century mainly comprised the Buddhist works, mostly translations from Tibetan and Turkic languages. These translations gave new forms and meaning to Mongolian literature (Enkhbayar, 2020). Though mostly written as prose, the Mongolian literature also used alliterative verse, myths, epic fragments, songs, eulogies, dialogues, and proverbs. The oral epic poetry was the most important genre in Mongolian literature which suggests that the Mongols were largely reliant on the oral tradition of the Tibetans, as is also evidenced by four concordances and translated Mongol names (Houston, 1980; Wallace, 2008, 2020).

- *Translation of the sutras and teachings of Buddhism*

The translation of the sutras and tractates of the ten sutras of knowledge of the Tripiṭaka via Tibetan led Mongolia to be considered a Buddhist nation. These translations of the ten sutras led to the knowledge of the Greater and Lesser Vehicles (*Mahayana* and *Hinyana*) in the Tripiṭaka of Buddhist scriptures and significantly contributed to the development of the Mongolian language and helped develop the classical academic language. Although Mongols translated individual sutras from the *Kangyur* by the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, a full translation was completed only in 1628-1629 at the order of Ligden Khaan (1592-1636). These volumes of translation were led by Gungaa-Odser, Samdansenge, Erdene Dalai and Samdub. Additionally, the *Kangyur*, the Buddha's oral teachings, and the *Tengyur*, commentaries on the *Kangyur* including the Vinaya (Monastic Law), Sutras (Discourses), and Abhidharma (Higher Doctrine), were originally written in Pali and then translated into Sanskrit, Tibetan, Mongolian and Chinese.

The *Tengyur* commentaries were translated into Mongolian in 1741-1742 by about 200 renowned Mongolian scholars, led by Rolbidorj and Luvsandanbinyam. In 1742-1749, several volumes of the *Mongol Bekhen Tengyur* were printed in a woodblock (xylograph) edition in Beijing. The result of this megaproject was a huge collection of sutras and tractates totalling 107,839 pages. It contained 3,427 sutras and teachings of Buddhist philosophy, as well as treatises on medicine, logic and analytical reasoning, and arts and crafts (Rintchen, 1974). As a result, the Mongols, who had previously been passing down stories, myths and other kinds of folklore orally, now had an academic language. They made Buddhism the official religion and Tibetan as the language of the Buddhist scriptures (Wallace, 2008, 2020).

These translations not only provided access to Buddhist works and numerous monastic schools, but also encouraged well-educated Mongol tulkus and lamas to express their views and theories in Tibetan (Enkhbayar, 2020). An unofficial record of the number of lamas who wrote in Tibetan comes approximately to almost 400. During the time of persecution in the 1930s, hundreds of lamas, monasteries, and temples were targeted and a huge volume of sutras and treatises either burned, destroyed or hidden deep in the mountains or underground. Fortunately, the sheer volume of sutras and treatises has ensured that many have been preserved till today.

## Results and Discussion

The findings of the study revealed that more than one million literary works in the form of manuscripts and woodblock prints in Mongolian and Tibetan are still preserved in the library of the Institute of Literature and Scripts established in Ulaanbaatar in 1924. Over 90 per cent of these are written in Tibetan, demonstrating the influence of the language of the Buddhist scriptures in Mongolia. Among the works of Mongolian scholars who wrote in Tibetan, a few were related to Mongolian grammar, including “To Articulate Meaning by Reading” (*Sog yig phyi mo bklag pas don gun 'dub pa zhes bya ba bzhugs so*) by Abbot Dambinyam of Western Choir monastery in Borjigon Tsetsen Wang Banner, Tusheet Khan Province; “Quantity and Quality Analysis of the Mongolian Alphabet, and the Use of Grammatical Cases on the Stems of Words as a Path to Enter the Clear Mind” (*Sog yig gi drangs dang rtags kyis 'jug tshul rnam dbye tshig 'phrad dper brjod dang bcas pa blo gsal 'jug ngogs zhes by aba bzhugs so*) written by Badam; and “Expressing Meaning Easily in the Mongolian Alphabet based on the Tibetan Alphabet as a Lamp Expelling Darkness” (*Sog yig bod yig la rten nas tshogs chung go byed kyi lde mig mun sel sgron me zhes by aba bzhugs so*) written by Agrampa Nanzad (Otgonaabaatar, 2014).

Specifically, of the ten aspects of knowledge in the Greater and Lesser Vehicles, *Da rig ba* (ལྷ་རིག་པ།) or the aspect of linguistics, *Nyan ag* (ལྷ་ན་ངག།) or the aspect of *Kavyadarsha* (poetics), *Deb jor* (ཐེབ་འཇུག།) or the aspect of stylistics, and *On jod* (མངོན་འཛོལ།) or the aspect of clear description/*abhidhāna* pertain to the linguistic sciences. Likewise, Tomi Samboda's *Sumdag* is relevant to several aspects of the Mongolian written language. The first aspect relates to the treatment of vowels and consonants and the classification of consonants into groups (high, medium, low, very low); the second one refers to the development of grammatical terminology and definitions; and the last one is evidence of the influence of complete translations of religious treatises on the classical written language of Mongolia, their role in consolidating Tibetan as a Buddhist scriptural language, and their great contribution to enriching the Mongolian vocabulary (Enkhbayar, 2020).

The study also revealed a few facts about the traditional written Tibetan language with its many commentaries/tractates. Tibet had become a Buddhist nation in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries after adopting an alphabet based on writing developed in India. By the 12<sup>th</sup> century the entire *Kangyur* and *Tengyur* had been translated into Tibetan. According to records, the Tibetan scholar Sakya Pandita Gungaajaltsan (ས་གླུ་པཎ་ཆེན་ཀུན་དགའ་རྒྱལ་མཚན།) developed the Mongolian alphabet (*Jiruken-u tolta*) and wrote the grammar of the Mongolian written language which was later lost. These formed the basis for improvement by many scholars working in the Eastern linguistic tradition of India and Tibet (Grønbech & Krueger, 1993).



In general, the Tibetan language can be divided into two sessions: *choigad*, the academic written language (the language of the Dharma or scriptural language), and *palgad*, the spoken language. It was the former that played an important role in the development of the Mongolian written language. The *Sumdag* conveyed the grammar of the ancient texts. The *Sumju* (*Guchit* as translated into Mongolian) is divided into 2 parts, altogether containing a total of 4 chapters, 4 sections and 10 subsections. We focused on two aspects covered in the second part (the *Bodit Shastir* or “Real treasure”): “Types of letters” (covered in 9 paragraphs) and “Applying Suffixed Letters” (14 paragraphs, including 8 on dependent suffixes and 6 on independent suffixes at the “Extensive Teaching for Guchit” within the subsection on “Extensive Teaching for the Arrangement of Letters”).

Comparing a partial list of contents from *Sumju* with that of the most important comprehensive grammar of written Mongolian, *Ogtorguin Maani* (Cosmic Maani) by Danzandagva, it is apparent that, despite slight differences, the section titles are virtually the same. Table 1 presents an evidence of this.

**Table 1.** Section titles of *Sumju* and *Ogtorguin Maani*

Titles	<i>Sumju</i>	<i>Ogtorguin Maani</i>
Types of letters	<i>Usgiin</i>	<i>Usgiin yalgal</i>
Offering Phrases	<i>Takhil</i>	<i>Takhil</i>
Real Treasure	<i>Bodot shastir</i>	<i>Bodot</i>
Gram. cases	<i>Tiin yalgal</i>	<i>Tiin yalgal</i>
Brief Conclusion	<i>Suul</i>	<i>Suul</i>

Source: (Dorj, 1965)

The *Dagjug* (*Temdegiin orlogo* in Mongolian translation) is divided into 3 parts, together containing a total of five chapters, six sections and seven subsections. It contains 50 paragraphs on prefixes and suffixes. The classification of words in the *Dagjug* is reproduced in grammatical materials in Mongolian. For instance, “strong”, “weak” and “neutral” are used in the “General classification of letters” in both works. However, there is a difference in the way the terms are used: whereas they refer to the classification of consonants in the *Dagjug*, in the *Ogtorguin Maani* they refer to vowel harmony. This is due to the adoption of differing principles, one based on consonant aspiration, the other on vocalics or vowel harmony. Initially, the creators of Mongolian alphabets and grammars were mostly Tibetans, including Gungaajaltsan, Lodoijaltsan, and Danzandagva. Choiji-Odser, of Uighur descent, was well educated in Tibetan and Sanskrit (Zhang & Zhang, 2018). Therefore, it is natural that they would follow the model of Eastern grammar (Pagba, 1957).

Under the Soviet influence in early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Cyrillic alphabet, or the Russian alphabet, was introduced in Mongolia. The Mongols had ruled Russia for more than two centuries (13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries), hence, an influence of the Russian language was felt in the form of Russian accent and adoption of a few Russian alphabets and numbers. The Mongolians, who had retained the traditional script of writing vertically like the Russians do, is based on the Cyrillic script and has been a part of the official writing system of Mongolia even today (Srba, 2020). A few examples are cited in Table 2, showing a sentence written in the Cyrillic script, its pronunciation, and the equivalent in Mongolian.

**Table 2.** Sentence in the Cyrillic script, its pronunciation, and equivalent in Mongolian

Sentence	Cyrillic script	Equivalent in Mongolian
Hi. My name is John.	Сайн байна уу? Миний нэр Жон. [sam bain u: mi'ni: ner dʒon]	/Sain baina* uu? Minii ner John./
What is your name?	Таны нэр хэн бэ? [ta'ni: ner xen be]	/Tanii ner hen be?/
How are you doing?	Сонин юу байна? [so'nin yu: bain]	/Sonin yuu baina*?/
I love you.	Би чамд хайртай. [bi ʃamd xar'tai]	/Bi chamd hairtai./
What a beautiful horse.	Ямар сайхан морь вэ! [ja'mar sai'xan 'mori ʃe]	/Yammar saihan mori we!/ /Biye dzassahh gadzar haana* bainawe?/
Where is the restroom?	Бие засах газар хаана байна вэ? [bi'je dʒa'sax ga'dzar xaan bain]	
Thank you very much.	Маш их баярлалаа. [maʃ iχ ba.jarla'laa]	/Mash ihh bayarlalaa./
It is good.	Сайн байна. [sam bain]	/Sain baina*./
Good-bye.	Баяртай. [bayar'tai]	/Bayartai./

Source: Zhang & Zhang, 2018. \*baina; \*haana: a short vowel at the end of a word is not pronounced. So these are pronounced like 'bain' and 'haan

Mongolian linguistic terms such as *teyin yalgal* (grammatical cases), *egshig* (vowel), and *giyigülegch* (consonant) are direct translations of Tibetan *Nam ye* (ནམ་ཡེ), *Yan yig* (ཡན་ཡིག) and *Sal jed* (སེལ་ཇེད) respectively (Burnee, 2013). Cases in Tibetan grammar are numerically ordered, a practice which is commonly followed in Mongolian grammar (Dorj, 1965). In the *Guchit*, Tibetan cases are organized according to Tibetan suffixes, such as “teaching the meaning of *la* (ལ) (dative)”, “teaching the completion of *i* (ི) (genitive)”, “teaching the root of the word (ablative)”, and “teaching the vocative”. Grammatical materials on Mongolian are arranged in a similar order, answering questions such as “what purpose is this case used for?” (Sambhota, 2022).

Sanskrit and Tibetan also contributed greatly to the enrichment of the Mongolian vocabulary. Before the 20th century, more people had Sanskrit and Tibetan names than had Mongolian names. This influence still persists. Among a group of 120 students, about 50 can be found to have names that are either Tibetan or mixed Tibetan-Mongolian. About 480 Sanskrit words, 366 Sanskrit names, 890 Tibetan words, and 6478 Tibetan names are listed in the *Dictionary of Foreign Words in the Mongolian Vocabulary* (Sukhbaatar, 1999) and *The Dictionary of Mongolian Personal Names*, bearing testimony to this influence (Choimaa, 2013).

Under the influence of Tibetan as the language of the Buddhist scriptures, the Mongolian high style became better developed than other styles. Academic terms are directly borrowed for the high style, including words such as *bandikhai* (disciple), *guntseg* (meal of a lama), *tugdum* (meditation), *lagshin* (physical condition), *lambugai* (respectful term for a lama), *manz* (meal), *nanchid* (alcoholic beverages), *rashaan* (spring water), *sharil* (tomb), and *usnir* (hairs), all of which are from Sanskrit and Tibetan.

## Conclusion

Mongolia received Buddhist teachings and education both directly and indirectly. Works received indirectly were mostly translations from Tibetan. As one of the languages of the Buddhist scriptures, written Tibetan, which was modeled on Sanskrit, had an influence on Mongolian academic writing. From written documents that have been passed down to the present day, there was clearly a differentiation between the common and official written languages. This is confirmed by the usage of native Mongolian, Sanskrit, and Tibetan words in the translation of many fundamental sutras of Eastern knowledge, and in the use of Sanskrit and Tibetan words and names in Mongolian (as seen in the *Dictionary of Foreign Words in the Mongolian Vocabulary* and *The Dictionary of Mongolian Personal Names*).

From this general overview, it is apparent that Mongolian scholars critically selected from the structure and content of the Tibetan *Sumdag* and Indian and Tibetan linguistic tenets, making bold changes at times in order to create their own unique writing style and develop this to a classical level. This can be confirmed by a structural comparison of the basic Tibetan linguistic work the *Sumju/Guchit* and the most comprehensive Mongolian grammar *Ogtorguin Maani*, which share key linguistic terms (vowels, consonants, weak-strong, etc.) and concepts (language of offerings, distinctions between letters, cases, endings, etc.).

From this, we can see that Sanskrit and Tibetan terms and definitions were borrowed into the initial Mongolian alphabet and grammar, and that many words and names entered Mongolian via the translation of dozens of sutras. This provided fruitful soil for the development of the Mongolian written and religious language.

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