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Scriptal environment in Mongolia

Stéphane Grivelet

In recent years, after nearly half a century of use of the Cyrillic script, the linguistic policy in Mongolia has been aiming at reintroducing the Mongolian script. The results of this policy in the contemporary Mongolian society can be compared with former, and more ancient, attempts of script shift, which have been characteristic of the tumultuous history of scripts in Mongolia.

One of the first steps of a script shift, or of a script reform, is the appearance of the new script, or new form of script, in a visible and publicized way. The use of the script in everyday life will first be implemented in what we may call the «scriptal environment» (Trix 1997.16) before entering the personal practice of individuals. The notion of scriptal environment encompasses different fields, which are formed by the «ordinary writings», i.e. the messages which may be seen in everyday life like the media (television, press), the scriptal surroundings (billboards, advertisements, information posters in the streets, shop signs, graffiti, etc.), postal materials (mainly the administrative and publicity letters), and product conditionings (O'Neil 1991.5).

Much of the research in this field has been related to a semiotical approach to the problem, which aims at trying to understand how the diverse messages conveyed by different means of communication are perceived by an individual. Attention has also been paid to the scriptal environment in a plurilingual and pluriscriptal society, showing the importance of the script signs as an expression of *identity*, the readability and transmission of information being secondary factors (Calvet 1994.172–178, 264–268).

In a monolingual and pluriscriptal society, the scriptal environment will be the main field for the recognizance of the most important script. The Mongolian situation may give us an insight on how a scriptal environment in a digraphic situation works. Digraphia should be understood here in a broader sense as either a script shift or the coexistence of two scripts (Grivelet 1998), instead of a definition restricted only to the «use of two or more different writing systems or scripts for the same language» (Coulmas 1996.129, cf. also DeFrancis 1984).

During the long and diverse history of creation, change and coexistence of scripts in Mongolia, the political or religious implications of those changes of linguistic policies were obvious (Kara s.a. 1, 11). Only a few cases of script use seem to have appeared spontaneously for some sociocultural reasons, the main examples being arguably the use of the Tibetan script for the Mongolian language, and probably the extension of the use of the Latin script in contemporary Mongolia. Most of the changes and creations of scripts having been made on a political basis, their implementation in the scriptal environment was necessary for the acceptance of such a reform. It was also the first area in which the choice of script could be induced by the political authorities.

The most famous example is perhaps the creation of the 'Phags-pa script in 1269 (Šagdarsüren 1981; Damdinsüren 1986). Intended to be the writing system of the new empire of Qubilai Qan, it could be used for all the principal languages of the empire, being in a way, as Vladimirtsov (quoted by Šagdarsüren, 1981.38) put it, «the international alphabet» of the 13th century. However, the 'Phags-pa script mainly appeared in epigraphical monuments. In his book on 'Phags-pa documents Ligeti presents only one handwritten document, the uniqueness of which is stressed (Ligeti 1972.38–42). Even if the extent of the use of this script in handwritten documents and books was larger than the surviving monuments suggest (Poppe 1957.8), the 'Phags-pa script seems to have assumed mainly an ornamental role on seals and steles.

The changes in the Mongolian script policy in the 1930s and 1940s also had a political background, directly connected with the policies created in the USSR. The Mongolian script was replaced in Mongolia in the 1940s by the Cyrillic script. In the 1980s, a kind of rehabilitation of the old script took place, and, as a result, Mongolian script courses were introduced in the 7th and 8th grades of secondary schools. The breakthrough for the reintroduction of the Mongolian script in Mongolia coincided with the democratization of the country in the early 1990s. A change of official script from the Cyrillic script to the Mongolian script was then scheduled, and some governmental and parliamentary decrees were issued on this. However, the date of the implementation of the script reform was repeatedly postponed, and the reform was gradually transformed into a longer project, which aims at the reintroduction of the Mongolian script with the Cyrillic script also retaining its official and preeminent position in a foreseeable future (Grivelet 1995).

The two scripts now coexist in Mongolia, creating a concurrent digraphia. The status of the two scripts and their places in the Mongolian scriptal environment show, however, important differences. Although more than a decade has passed since the first attempt of script shift, the

Cyrillic script has not lost its dominant position, except temporarily in the educational system, where it was, between 1990 and 1994, replaced by the Mongolian script in the first years of schooling. Otherwise, the Cyrillic script has retained its status as the script in which the Mongolian people read and write. On the other hand, in spite of both private promotion and governmental support, the Mongolian script has not imposed itself in most of the Mongolian scriptal environment.

In studying the Mongolian situation, two main areas will be of interest: the media, mainly the press, and the scriptal surroundings. As far as the press is concerned, some legal attempts have been made in order to support the reintroduction of the Mongolian script. According to the governmental decree 186 of June 21, 1991, newspapers are supposed to be partially published in the Mongolian script. Similarly, the governmental decree 64 of March 16, 1994, asks for the publication of newspaper material in the Mongolian script. However, these attempts have obviously remained unsuccessful, for up to the present day nearly all newspapers and magazines in Mongolia are published only in the Cyrillic script—including those directly related to the government, like *Ardyn erx* [People's Right], which is the most widely-read newspaper in Mongolia, or *Jasgiin gajryn medee* [News from the Government]. Most of the newsstands in Ulaanbaatar are not selling any publications in the Mongolian script.

In the press published in the Cyrillic script, the Mongolian script is nearly absent, although it does occasionally appear, often in its ornamental square form, to write the title, alongside a parallel title in Cyrillic. It can also be present in advertisements as a kind of motto or symbol, while the actual information contained in the advertisement is written in the Cyrillic script.

However, a press in the Mongolian script does also exist. The main periodical in the Mongolian script, *Kümün bičig* [Human Script] is published by the official Montsame Press Agency. It has had some success, in that it was in 1994 subscribed by 5,000 persons, making it the 8th most circulated publication, though still far from the more than 37,000 copies of *Ardyn erx* (*Ardyn erx*, 2 July, 1994). The other publications in the Mongolian script such as, for example, *Mongol bičig sojol* (published in both the Mongolian and the Cyrillic script), *Mongγol bičig*, and *Mongγol bičig-ün tölög*, are published irregularly and are often of an ephemeral or confidential character. Typically, they are not sold on the newsstands of the capital. Some of these publications have created a network to increase their circulation, especially through schools (cf. *Mongol bičig sojol*, N° 5, April 1994).

The contents of the publications in the Mongolian script are mainly devoted to the subject of the script reform. Even *Kümün bičig* [Human Script], which tries to be more like a regular weekly with different types of information (for example, TV programs), features in its main articles stories pertaining to the reintroduction of the Mongolian script. The other publications mentioned above are even more specialized. Apart from descriptions of educational experiences and successes connected with the script reform, they only contain historical articles and letters from the readers. It has to be mentioned, however, that the Mongolian script has also been used in some children's magazines, such as *Unaga*, *Dino*, and others. These typically feature stories, drawings and photographs about the traditional Mongolian nomadic way of life.

Very few books in the Mongolian script are available in Mongolia. Most of these books are school textbooks or didactical aids for learning the script. Teach-yourself books on the Mongolian script existed already in the 1960s and 1970s, but this type of publication became much more important in the late 1980s, with a continuing expansion after 1989. Some of the recent books in this field, especially those published 1989–1990, are actually reprints and new editions of old teaching materials from the 1920s and 1930s. After 1990, most of the relevant books have been new publications, with some of them aiming at a very basic level of knowledge (the letters of the Mongolian script), and others offering a more advanced approach (orthographical rules, sample texts for reading). However, apart from this limited thematic range, nearly all the books published in Mongolia are written in the Cyrillic script. Exceptions include some state publications (for example, the new constitution of Mongolia adopted in 1992) and religious books, which are published in both scripts. It should also be noted that very few books from Inner Mongolia are imported and sold in Mongolia.

The most sensitive area of the scriptal environment is probably formed by the scriptal surroundings. In this field, the situation is polarized. The Mongolian script has been effectively reintroduced in certain uses, but it remains absent in others. The idea of promoting the reintroduction of the Mongolian script in the scriptal surroundings has only recently appeared in governmental decrees. In decree 64 (point 5) of 16 March, 1994, there is mention of the necessity of creating an environment in the Mongolian script by publishing the laws in both script, and by using the Mongolian script for diplomatic documents as well as for the announcement of TV programs, exhibitions, concerts and services. These directives have never been systematically followed. Nevertheless, since 1990, the use of the Mongolian script has increased in three areas pertaining to the scriptal

surroundings. These areas are: permanent signs with an ornamental purpose, doorplates, and graffiti.

The Cyrillic script is still used in all signs, billboards, and information posters related to commercial or informational purposes. Such signs can be either temporary (for example, the announcement of a cultural event, especially concerts), or permanent (signs for shops, street names). Most of these signs are created on private initiative by individuals or private companies. On the other hand, the Mongolian script is used in permanent signs with an ornamental purpose. Such signs include, for instance, those celebrating the 750th anniversary of the *Secret History of the Mongols*, as well as those welcoming visitors to the Mongolian capital. In these cases, the Mongolian script has a calligraphic form, accompanied by paintings and decorations. Such signs are not necessarily intended to be read, and they are invariably created through administrative initiative by either the state or the municipal authorities.

The Mongolian script is also used on doorplates, especially those of administrative offices, institutions, and some commercial organizations (banks, for example). In these cases, the Mongolian script is occasionally accompanied by an English translation, while a Cyrillic version can be absent. This has created a situation in which some doorplates cannot be read by Mongols who do not know either the Mongolian script or the English language. Also, the English translation is actually of a limited practical use even for most foreigners in Mongolia, for the two main foreign communities are the Russians and the Chinese. This shows that, again, the readability of the signs is considered as being of secondary importance.

Graffiti are perhaps the most interesting area where the use of the two scripts can be observed. In Mongolia, most graffiti are made by school children. They are normally written with chalk or stone on walls or metallic surfaces, especially on garages made of old containers. As far as their contents are concerned, they mainly relate to school experiences. Most of them are commentaries about specific classes, or caricatures of schoolmates with the inscription *ene bol* 'this is' and the name of the intended person. The accompanying inscriptions use the vocabulary of the classroom, such as the names of different marks and grades (*onc* 'excellent', *dund* 'average'). Moderately offensive sentences like «Is Batbayar an idiot?» are also encountered. The phenomenon of tags still stays on a much lower level in Mongolia than in many other countries. Political and sexual graffiti are also virtually unknown.

In 1994, nearly all the graffiti were in the Mongolian script, apart from a few written in the Cyrillic script. There were some thematic differences between the graffiti in the two scripts. Thus, for instance,

most of the graffiti of the type $B + A = Xair$ 'B + A = Love' used the Cyrillic script. These graffiti could be attributed to older children or teenagers, who had received their initial education in the Cyrillic script and were only taught the Mongolian script as a secondary system of writing during a few lessons a week. It may be concluded that the use of a certain script in graffiti is directly related to educational policies. In 1994, after the Mongolian script had been used as the main script for children from the first class onward, this script prevailed in the graffiti material. After 1994, however, when the Cyrillic script was reintroduced as the main script at school, a corresponding change took place in the script preferred for graffiti.

Conclusion

During the last decade, the attempts to reintroduce and promote the Mongolian script in Mongolia have failed in most areas of the scriptal environment. The Cyrillic script continues to be used in most publications and signs, especially commercially motivated signs, which are intended to be read. In a way similar to former experiences of imposing a script chosen by the political power, the Mongolian script is mainly restricted to epigraphic, ornamental, and symbolic uses, in which there is little concern about its readability.

The place of the Mongolian script in the scriptal environment is thus similar to its general status in the Mongolian digraphia. Notwithstanding the efforts aiming at its full-scale reintroduction, it remains a little-used system of writing with a strong symbolic value. The Mongolian script is highly valued by all the Mongols as an important part of their cultural heritage, related to traditions and authenticity. However, it only exists alongside with the Cyrillic script, which retains its dominant position in the Mongolian society and scriptal environment.

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