

The magic of writing—edible charms

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Writing is a mysterious magic. One puts black signs on blank paper and another person looking at the signs understands what they mean. The power of writing is especially mysterious in a society of predominantly illiterate people. The knowledge of the miraculous signs of writing, and the ability of using them, make scribes exceptional persons.

In the beginning there was the SIGN—signs were carved on stone or wood, and signs were used to indicate that a certain property is owned by a certain person. This function of the sign was preserved in later times, as well. In Central Asia Sir Aurel Stein excavated sticks that were used to record taxes and debts.¹ The Tibetan name of such sticks was *khram* or *khram-šing*, in Mongolian *ḡirwγ modun* or *γaγaḡalaqui modun* ‘stick of calculation’, ‘tally stick’. Later, these sticks disappeared from real «business life» and found their way into the field of mythology. People destined to go to hell have to show their *khram* to the Lord of Death in documentation of their beneficial and evil actions.

A Mongolian funeral handbook prescribes that a stick of the bones of a man, horse and dog, painted with ochre, should be prepared and placed on the back of the dead person’s substitute (*ḡoliγ*) figure.² This stick he has to present to Erlig Khan in the underworld. The same scene is present in the *Bar-do thosgrol*, the «Tibetan Book of the Dead», where the king of the underworld examines the *khram* of the dead man and sees at once how many sins he has committed in his lifetime.³ The same stick is an attribute of Lha-mo, the Mother Goddess who plays a significant role in healing and also in judging the departed.⁴

Signs as property-marks have been preserved up to the present time as tamgas. Families put marks on horses, cattle and sheep to indicate the owner.⁵ The deceased in hell are similarly marked by the hell-servants, so they become the property of the ruler of the underworld (Fig. 1).⁶

The next step in the development of writing was the PICTOGRAM, which presented the given object or a whole sentence, and had nothing to do with the pronunciation. This stage was followed by the IDEOGRAM, the interpretation of which predisposes common consent. Later, each ideogram was linked with a certain pronunciation, resulting in logography and, ultimately, character writing.

Mongolian writing was taken over from the Uighurs relatively late, in approximately the 12th century. The earliest language monuments date from the 13th century. Respect of writing and of the written word developed very early, however. Books were regarded as sacred and handled with special care. It was strictly prescribed how to take them in hand, how to hand them over to another person, and where to place them. Priests, when taking a book in hand or giving it over to another person, touched their forehead with it. Books were kept at the most sacred places in the monastery, and one of the most important and highly estimated activity was to copy sutras. Several books, among them prophetic works, mention and prescribe that the given text should be copied several times and spread in order to attain salvation.⁷



Fig. 1. The sinful being marked by a hell-servant.
Xylograph from the Collection of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Mong. 278.

Books, when worn out or come «out of fashion», have never been thrown away or burnt—it was strictly forbidden to destroy written papers—but they were placed in a so-called «dry well» built in every monastery. Ligeti, when travelling in Inner Mongolia, collected the nicest and oldest pieces from these dry wells. Even today, when in the library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences one turns the leaves of books brought back by him, fine grains of sand drop out of them.

The book has also become the attribute of Mañjuśrī, the celestial Bodhisattva, who is Shakyamuni's first representative in the Mahâyāna

literature. He is the symbolic realization of transcendent wisdom and is represented holding the stem of a lotus flower with a book of the *Prajñâpâramitâ* resting on it.⁸ The book has also found its way into hell. The head of the underworld, Erlik Khan, consults a book which indicates the evil and good actions of the doomed. The scene reminds us of the highly developed Chinese and Manchu administration (Fig. 2).⁹



Fig. 2. The Book of Faith for registering good and evil actions.
Xylograph from the Collection of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Mong. 278.

Finally, writing has covered the way from meaningful words back to pictograms. Words were first concentrated into a syllable and later into a letter or charm. The mystic syllable was as real as god himself and charms defended against sickness, ill-luck or any other harm. Such printed or written charms for luck, called «prayer-flags», were fixed to trees or on top of poles. These flags served the well-being of the whole community. Similar charms or holy syllables were placed in praying mills that were turned around by water, wind, or by the believers visiting the monastery.¹⁰

Most charms were worn on the owner as amulets. Paper slips were folded up into little balls and put into cloth or skin packets bound with coloured threads, or kept in cases of brass, silver or gold, and then hang over the neck or attached to the clothes. Children, in particular, needed the protection of these spells as they were more easily affected by different kinds of evil. Professor Bawden points out the application of spells (*tarni*), charms (*kürdü*) and amulets (*buu*) amongst the Mongols.¹¹ Medical works such as the *Eldeb čiqula keregtü* contain not only the prescriptions, but also charms for all sorts of disease. Formulae

in corrupt Sanskrit taken from Tantric scriptures were believed to hold supernatural powers.¹²

A prophetic book from the collection of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (Mong. 75) prescribes the application of a charm: *vuu bičig-i žegügtün... teyin kibesü sayin čaγ-ud-i olju üžekü ta* ‘stick on this written charm... if you make so, you will see a prosperous time.’ Or: *ene buu bičig-i bayılγaγu eregtei kümün žegün mürü deger-e žegütügei, qaturγ-tai kümün barayun mürü deger-e žegütügei* ‘Prepare this written charm and stick it on the left shoulder of a man and on the right shoulder of a woman.’¹³

In 1997, a joint Hungarian-Mongolian expedition had the opportunity to make photos of such a book of charms. It was kept together with other astrological text-books indicating that they are of a similar value. The owner of the charms told us, that the charms were used to put around the necks of sheep to protect them from disease. However, a closer look at them suggests that they were more probably used to protect humans and only occasionally cattle.

After a short introductory text the book gives the charms that should be applied. The external forms of the charms are reminiscent of the *lanča* script. Similar items have been published by Nebesky-Wojkowitz and Heissig.¹⁴ The charms are accompanied by Tibetan expressions, both meaningful and meaningless. The use of these expressions shows that the compiler wished to indicate that the charms came from Tibet, as anything Tibetan was regarded more sacred and, hence, more effective than local products. Instructions concerning the use of the charms are also given in Mongolian as follows:

<i>qamuq burqan ibekü</i>	All Buddhas! Protect us!
<i>nilqas xučaxu-du züü</i>	Stick it on when the baby coughs!
<i>ügei kümün bayan bolqu</i>	Poor man will become rich.
<i>čilaran xarsidu züü</i>	Stick it on when being exhausted!
<i>küligsen gemi čidxu bui</i>	It overpowers the disease that binds you.
<i>aliba üiledü sayin</i>	It is good in all kinds of actions.
<i>gerte γai ülü bolxu ügei</i>	There will not be any harm in the house.
<i>üre emedü čidker ülü bolxu ügei</i>	There will not be any harm for wife and children.
<i>mal ülü γarxu ügei</i>	Cattle will not stray.
<i>sañs-rgyas kun-gyi phyag rgya</i>	[Tibetan:] Let everybody bow to Buddha!
<i>xoni ebečin-dü züü</i>	Stick it when the sheep are ill!
<i>mou yoro darxu buu dotoγudu züü</i>	The charms averting bad omens should be stuck inside.
<i>ürü ügei kümün ürütei bolxu</i>	A childless person will have a child.
<i>nasun urtu bolod</i>	It ensures long life.
<i>erketeni saki</i>	It saves the sense organs.

<i>köbүү irebesü zүү</i>	Stick it on when expecting a baby!
<i>moto xu</i>	?
<i>ikiri köbүd-dү zүү</i>	Stick it on tweens!
<i>уγusqu idekү oldoqu</i>	You will get drink and food.
<i>xaldaburi ebečin-dү zүү</i>	Stick it on in case of an infectious disease!
<i>öberün öböčindү zүү</i>	Stick it on when you yourself are ill!
<i>čono noxoyin ayuldu sayin</i>	It helps in case of wolf and dog danger.
<i>үkerün öbečin-dү zүү</i>	Stick it on in case of cattle disease!

In Tibetan: (dharani: *hum, bzra,...*), *lang-dab* 'recover', *thams-čad bži-bar gyur čig* 'Let everything multiply four times'.

Among the leaves of these astrological works there was one that especially aroused my interest. It was a relatively modern piece written on modern paper by an unskilled hand hardly familiar with writing. This appeared strange: What subject could be so important that a person not used to handle a pen decided to put it on paper? A closer examination of the leaf immediately suggested that it contained charms which the patient should swallow

This edible chart (Fig. 3) contains a charm and 12 to 13 fields written in Tibetan and Mongolian. The Tibetan portion seems to have the function of magic letters (*dharani*), while the Mongolian text gives instructions as follows:

<i>aduu morini ebeči sakixu buu</i>	Magic charm against horse disease.
<i>xaral xariγulxu-du idee</i>	Eat it to return curses!
<i>amin xačiγsan-du idee</i>	Eat it when your life is in danger!
<i>törözi yadaxula idee</i>	Eat it when you are unable to give birth!
<i>toloγoi ergiküi-dү</i>	[Eat it] when your head is dizzy!
<i>γalzoo noxoi zuxsan-du idee</i>	Eat it when a wild dog has bitten you!
<i>xamuy ebečini sida</i>	It helps in any kind of disease.
<i>xay adayin saqaq [?]</i>	It helps against evil spirits. [?]
<i>toloγoi-un örgegidү idee</i>	Eat it when your head is confused!
<i>zorigin ködölkүdү idee</i>	Eat it in case of earthquake!
<i>köböüten bolxu saxaq</i>	It helps when expecting a child.
<i>šara xaluyin-du idee</i>	Eat it in case of yellow fever!

This practice is not unknown in literature. The eating of a piece of paper on which a charm has been written is a common method of curing diseases in Tibet. Such paper slips are called in Tibetan 'edible letters', *za-yig*. L. A. Waddell published the picture of one of them.¹⁵ Heissig, on the other hand, has published a paper presenting the printing bar of such a text, in which connection he analyses the custom. The printing bar was brought back from Jehol, East Mongolia between 1920 and 1928. Our

text, however, is written in Oirat, indicating that the custom was observed in the entire territory of Mongolia.

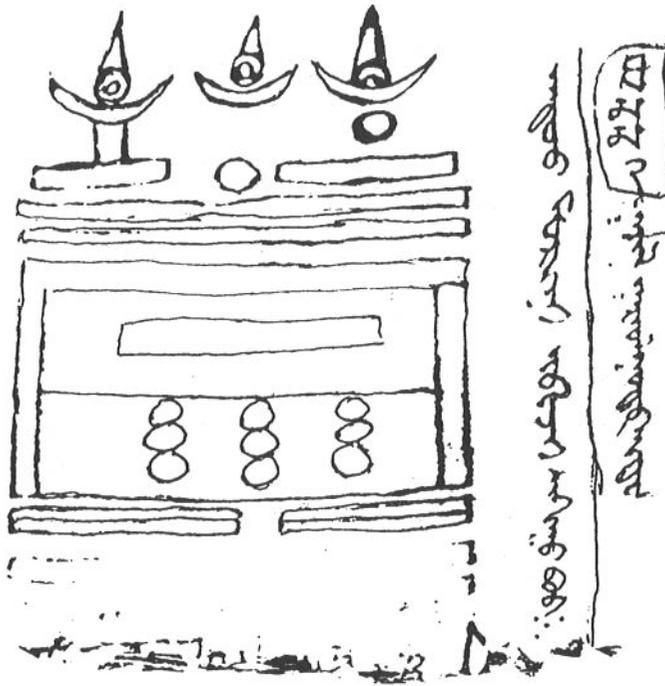


Fig. 3. Initial part of an edible charm.

The leaf discussed here, written by an unskilled hand on modern paper, proves that such amulets are prepared even today. The belief in the magic power of writing among the Mongols continues to be relevant in our modern age.

Notes

- 1 Stein's collection of *khram* sticks is depicted in his *Serindia* III, Oxford, 1921, pp. 1463, 1464.
- 2 *kümün morin noqay-yin yasun-I josun-iyar khram kijü tegün-ü aru-dur ügür-gen üiled Tib. mi rta khyi rus bcag-khram btab de-yi gres-por bsku-barbya* 'Prepare a stick of the bones of a man, horse and dog and paint it with ochre. Place it on the back of the figure.' The full text has been published by A. Sárközi: A Bon funeral rite in Lamaist Mongolia, *Synkretismus in den Religionen Zentralasiens*, herausgegeben von W. Heissig und H-J. Klimkeit, Otto Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden 1987, p. 124.

- 3 G. Tucci, *Tibetan painted scrolls*, Rome 1949, pp. 616–617.
- 4 A detailed analysis of this attribute of Lha-mo is given by A. Róna-Tas: Tally-stick and divination dice in the iconography of Lha-mo, *Acta Orientalia Hung.* VI (1956) p. 167.
- 5 For a long list of tamgas cf. A. Dorjgotov & Č. Songino, *Zuragt tol' (Ed mörijn barimtyн товч нер том'ёо)*, Ulaanbaatar 1998, pp. 70–83.
- 6 Cf. Géza Bethlenfalvy & Alice Sárközi: Representation of Buddhist hells in a Tibeto-Mongol illustrated blockprint. *Altaica Collecta*. Berichte und Vorträge der XVII. Permanent International Altaistic Conference. (3.–8. Juni 1974, Bonn/Bad Honnef), Wiesbaden 1976, plate 13.
- 7 For example: *dayisun ayul-i ügei bolγaǰu ülü bolqu tula ene bičigi-i üjegen darui delekei-deküni-ü olan amitan nige nigendegen ulami olan bičijü tarqayabasu nigen kümün-ü jobalang arilamui arban bičijü tarqayabasu nigen gerün ayul jobalang arilamui : jaγuu bičijü tarqayabasu ene irekü mayu čaγ-un ayul dayisun-i ketüreǰü γaruγad...* 'It is impossible to stop the armies and weapons of the enemy. The only real help will be that as soon as the people of the world see this text, they begin to copy and recopy it many times in order to spread it. If someone prepares one copy and distributes it, the sufferings of one person will disappear; if someone prepares ten copies and distributes them, the sufferings of a whole family will disappear. If someone prepares and distributes a hundred copies, the danger and enemies of this coming time of calamity will pass and you will see the Wooden Rat year...' A. Sárközi, *Political prophecies in Mongolia in the 17–20th centuries*. Otto Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden 1992, pp. 49, 55.
- 8 E. Lamotte, Mañjuśrī. In: *T'oung Pao* XLVIII (1960), pp. 1–96. For a depiction, cf. N. Tsultem, *Mongolian Sculpture*, p.80.
- 9 Géza Bethlenfalvy & Alice Sárközi: Representation of Buddhist hells in a Tibeto-Mongol illustrated blockprint. *Altaica Collecta*. Berichte und Vorträge der XVII. Permanent International Altaistic Conference. (3.–8. Juni 1974, Bonn/Bad Honnef), Wiesbaden 1976, plate 16.
- 10 For illustrations, see, for instance, Lumír Jisl, *Mongolei, Kunst und Tradition*, Artia Praha 1961, p. 35, and N. Tsultem, *Mongolian Arts and Crafts*, State Publishing House: Ulan-Bator 1987, p. 112.
- 11 Ch. R. Bawden, The supernatural element in sickness and death according to Mongol tradition. Part II. Published in: Charles R. Bawden, *Confronting the supernatural: Mongolian traditional ways and means*. Collected papers. Harrassowitz Verlag: Wiesbaden 1994, p. 93.
- 12 Bawden, *loc.cit.* W. Heissig published a paper on the process of preparation of these amulets: Ein mongolisches Handbuch für die Herstellung von Schutzamuletten. In: *Tribus* 11 (1962), pp. 69–83.

- 13 Alice Sárközi, *Political Prophecies in Mongolia in the 17-20th Centuries*, Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 1992, pp. 27–40. G. Kara, *Catalogue of Mongol and Manchu manuscripts and xylographs in the collection of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences*, Akadémiai Kiadó: Budapest 1999, p. 21.
- 14 Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Oracles and demons of Tibe: The cult and iconography of the Tibetan protective deities*, Book Faith India: Delhi 1996, plate XX. The charms published here protect against various kinds of evil: epidemics, illness, leprosy, hunger, etc. However, there is no mention of their being swallowed. Cf. also W. Heissig, Heilung durch Zettelschlucken, *Die Mongolen*, p. 232.
- 15 L. A. Waddell, *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism: With its mystic cults, symbolism and mythology*. Cambridge 1971 (1895), p. 401.