

The Leverhulme Trust

Awards in Focus

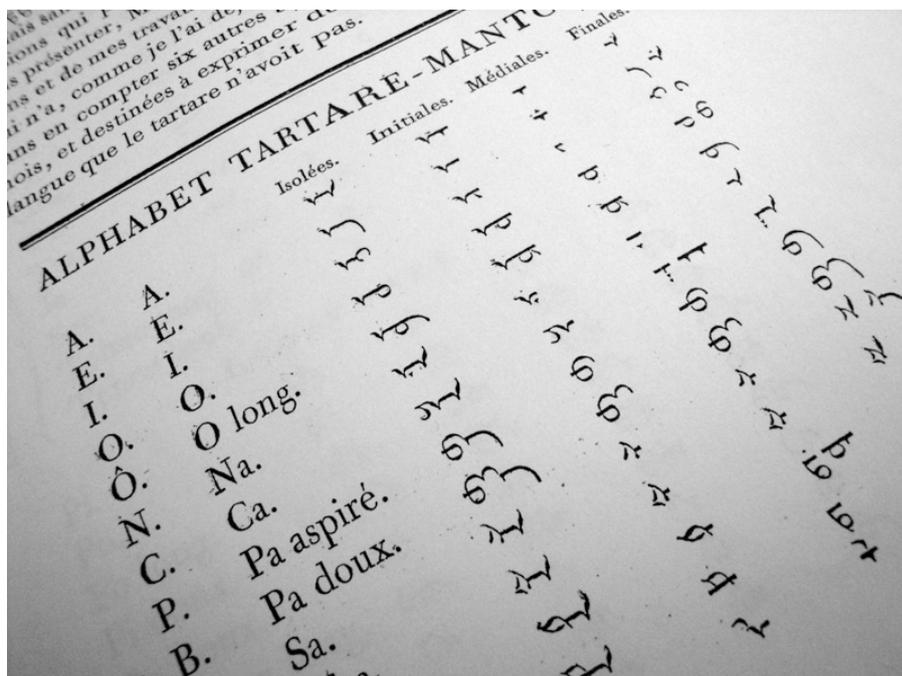
Mongolian script: from metal type to digital font

The Mongolian language and its script were split apart in the 1940s when the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets were politically imposed. However, the authentic, 'traditional', Mongolian writing system survived and is still used in publications today. In December 2005, a team of experts from the National University of Mongolia and the Mongolian University of Science and Technology proposed a UNESCO-supported project which promotes the use of the traditional Mongolian script by text processing and web publishing tools.

But those few Mongolian fonts, which presently exist, are of poor typographic and technical quality, inadequate to represent the Mongolian written language appropriately over a range of text-types and platforms. The need for high-quality fonts for typesetting texts in the traditional Mongolian script is clear: they are needed in contemporary Mongolian publishing, both in print and on-screen, worldwide in the cataloguing systems of libraries and universities (which at the moment use Latin transliteration), and in several other typographic applications.

This Early Career Fellowship creates the opportunity to provide a comprehensive historical account on the evolution of the printed Mongolian character, and to offer practice-oriented guidance for the design and development of new digital fonts for the traditional Mongolian script. It adopts the methodology developed and tested in my work on Tibetan typeforms, which use an exhaustive historical survey to support critical contemporary analysis.

The main objectives are to develop a framework to describe the visual and technical quality of Mongolian typefaces; to establish the extent of printing houses using Mongolian typefaces; to explore how Mongolian typefaces were developed and typeset; and to set up practical guidelines for creating contemporary fonts for the traditional Mongolian script.

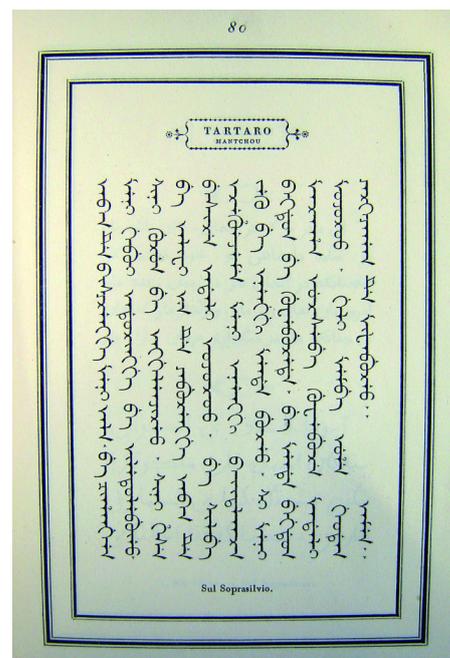


Detail from page 14 of Louis-Mathieu Langlès's 'Alphabet Tartare-Mantchou' (Paris, 1787) showing the first metal printing type for the Mongolian script, cut by the Parisian punchcutter Firmin Didot.

The Trust's funding will enable the development and design of a database which facilitates the comparison, characterisation and classification of the separately examined Mongolian typefaces, along with additional contextual information on their typographic use and visual, historical and theoretical analysis of Mongolian typeforms. This new resource will offer considerable improvement to Mongolian typography.

The project website (www.mongoliantype.com) will present findings and practical guidance supported by theoretical analysis, in conjunction with the database of Mongolian typefaces, publicly available to scholars of Mongolian language and culture, to historians of print, to professional (typeface) designers, software developers, librarians, linguists, academics, and to all those who have an interest in non-Latin typography and typeface design.

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The Mongolian printing type cut by the Italian punchcutter Giambattista Bodoni in 'Manuale tipografico' (Parma, 1818).

Jo was awarded an Early Career Fellowship grant in 2010.