

Books of Knowledge

"The day they burned our monastery's sacred treasures- the gold plated books and scripts, - was the darkest in my life," an old lama who spoke this has long died.

So did P.Khorloo, a rural teacher who secretly collected ancient books and scripts and interviewed old monks. But their deeds preserved and passed on the rich culture and the knowledge to the next generations.

Nomads who adopted the culture of Buddhism revered books as the paramount treasures of humanity and the source of knowledge. Each nomad family considered it to be a great honor to have at home books and musical instruments.

"Even despite the ban on religious scripts and millions of books burnt in 1930s, every herder family, especially with old people, preserves one," from records of a Polish ethnographic expedition which worked in Bayan soum of the Tuv province in mid 70s.

For some the notion of wandering nomads and written books may never come together. In reality, the history of the Mongolian books counts more than 800 years beginning with the epic of the "Secret History of the Mongols"

The books were widespread. Not only Buddhist canons but literary almanacs, poetry, songs and fairy tales as well as reference books in medicine, astrology, veterinary, various textbooks and dictionaries were circulating and commonly used.



Books varied from huge volumes of religious canons, richly embroidered with silver, gold and precious stones to small, ruggedly printed brochures. There were even pocket books flipped together like a playing cards as well as long scripts rolled and put into wooden or leather containers with a special hook to hang it to a sash or horse saddle.

As early as 14th century, single standards and technology for printing books were developed observed by all printers, covering formats, styles, and even the technology of ink and paper preparation. "The printing



Volumes of religious manuscripts and texts were lavishly embroidered with gold, silver and precious stones.



technology was very sophisticated and refined," says Ts. Shugar, a Mongolian books' history expert.

"The paper production involved many ingredients of botanical or even wildlife origin. Depending on future use of paper, up to 30 kinds of paper were produced, each having unique characteristics."

"For example some papers were protected against moisture and even bugs. To make a black color paper on which letters with gold or silver ink was written, sheep brains were used. In other cases, the paper edges were smoked to make it stronger and enduring. This way, old books were preserved for centuries without much decay."

Prof. B. Rinchin, a renowned Mongolian scholar, once discovered a bibliography of about 2,000 books and a note of the completion of printing 30 volumes of Ganjuur with golden letters and 1,000 volumes of books at the ruins of the Bishrelt Beelii monastery in Setsen Khaan province. This was the annual output of only one monastery's printing house. Since almost all large monasteries had printing facilities, one can imagine the volume of publishing.



A religious tractat written in golden letters and decoarted with carved miniatures of Buddhist gods.

Along with printed books, many hand written and copied manuscripts were circulating. Mongols, fond of books, paid special attention to the style and the beauty of book designs and did not save money to produce special editions lavishly decorated with gold and precious stones, or covered with color silks. The letters were written with ink using gold, silver, pearls, coral and other precious stones.

Last December, the State Library put for the first time on display the ancient books including such rarities as Sandui Dzhud tractat, a masterpiece by printer Dagva who used 50 kg gold and 400 kg of silver for the book illustrations and decoration.

Xylograph printed books of translations from Tibetan, Sanskrit, Chinese and Persian appeared in Mongolia as early as mid 13th century. An example of high quality of medieval Mongolian books can be seen from the richly illustrated "Twelve Canons of Buddha", now kept in Leningrad.

"Secret History of the Mongols"



Nuuts Tovchoo ([The Secret History of the Mongols](#)) is an outstanding historical, cultural and literary monument written by an unknown author around 1240. Belong to the world heritage of literary treasures, its 750 years anniversary was celebrated in 1990 under UNESCO aegis. The Secret History of the Mongols is a honest, sincere account depicting Chinggis Khaan without embellishment or laudation. The book is not apology for bloody military campaigns or the praisal of conquerors' ambitions. Written i poetry the epic is a combination of historical narration, folklore and old poetry. Its artistic merits remain unsurpassed but real fame and world renown still await this outstanding work as the existing translations into main languages are purely scientific and do not make for easy reading.

The Knowledge Books

The publication of Buddhist encyclopaedia Ganjuur and Danjuur marked a very special period in the history of written culture of Mongols. The first attempt to publish the books was taken in 13th century, but the turbulent history of that time did not allow to accomplish such a grand undertaking as Ganjuur alone consists of 108 volumes with 1162 chapters.

After five centuries, Ligden Khaan ordered to translate and print the encyclopaedia and in 1628 the first edition in Mongolian was completed. The next edition, published in 1742 has 220 volumes and more than 100,000 pages.

There were several editions of Ganjuur. A hand written edition with letters written by ink produced with nine precious stones was made in 18th century. The Golden Ganjuur, now preserved at the State Libarary, was translated by Gunga Osor and published in 1820.

Some European libraaraies have incomplete editions of Ganjuur taken out of the country before the revolution.

