

## The Manchu alphabet

In 1599 Nurhachi, founder of the Manchu Empire, ordered that a writing system be created for the Manchu language; see TABLE 49.6. Erdeni Bakshi added some new symbols to the Mongolian script, and this system, the “alphabet without dot and circle,” was used until Dahai’s reform of 1632, which introduced the “alphabet with dot and circle.” Positional variation of the Mongolian letters is preserved, but all the ambiguities of Mongolian script are eliminated by diacritics and new symbols; hence this easternmost descendant of the Aramaic script is an ideal tool for recording Manchu phonemes and some allophones. Additional symbols make it possible to give an exact Manchu transcription of Mandarin Chinese. The new letters derived from those of the Mongol script are: *f* (hooked beth, before vowels other than *u* and *i*, where plain beth = *w* renders *f*); *p* (pe with indented bow); *š* (modified shin); *t*<sup>1</sup> (round initial *taw* for *t* before *a*, *o*, and Chinese *i*); *d*<sup>1</sup> (smooth lamedh for medial *d* before *a*, *o*); *t*<sup>2</sup> (pointed initial *taw* for *t* before *e* or *u*); *d*<sup>2</sup> (pointed lamedh for medial *t* before *e* or *u*); *y* (hooked yodh, while plain initial yodh = *ǰ*); crossed kaph for foreign *k* before *a* or *o*; crossed shin = Chinese *c* (*ts*’); shin with vertical stroke = Chinese *j* (*ts*, pinyin *z*); zain = Chinese *zh* (pinyin *r*).

A dot on the left marks *n* before a vowel. The diacritic dot and circle that appear on the right side of the letter cannot be combined with each other. Dotted aleph = *e*, dotted waw = *u*, dotted gimel = *γ*, dotted kaph = *g*, dotted *taw* or lamedh = *d* (e.g., dotted round *taw* + waw = *do*, while dotted pointed *taw* + waw = *du*).

Gimel with circle = unvoiced velar spirant before *a* or *o*; kaph with circle = unvoiced velar spirant [x] before *e*, *u*, or *i*. Gimel with double dot on the left side = syllable-final *q*. Chinese *ǐ*, or the retroflex character of the preceding affricate (cf. pinyin *chi* and *zhi*), is marked by a circle below *č* or *ǰ*. After *s* and the alveolar affricates, a diacritic similar to an inverted shin marks the appropriate foreign vowel. The vowel *u* is marked by the digraph waw + yodh after dotted gimel and dotted kaph. If *u* is the second element of a diphthong, no dot is added (so Manchu *geu* ‘mare’ is transcribed *geo*). Punctuation is single and double tear-shaped dots, for smaller and larger units.

Competing with Chinese calligraphy, many styles were designed for seals and various ornamental purposes. The Manchu dialect of the Shibe people of China is still written in this script; it was formerly also the writing system for Mongolic Daur, spoken in China (now romanized).

TABLE 49.6: *Manchu Script*

	<i>Initial</i>	<i>Medial</i>	<i>Final</i>	<i>Separate</i>	<i>Ligatures</i>	
a						ba ke
e						be
i						bi, ki
o						bo
u						bu, gu
ô <sup>a</sup>						
n before V						
n syll. end						
ng						
q <sup>b</sup>						
q syll. end						
k						
γ						
g						
k'						k'a
g'						k'o, g'o
χ						
x						
b						
p						
s						
š						

## SAMPLE OF MANCHU

1. *Transliteration:* amba dorô . amba qooli de gemu songqoloro / temgetu be
  2. *Transcription:* amba dorô amba kooli-de gemu songkoloro temgetu-be
  3. *Gloss:* great rule great law-in all following seal-ACC
- 
1. baɣara . emu gisun emu ɣônin seme yooni doron tuwaqô / bisire be
  2. bahara emu gisun emu gūnin seme yooni doron tuwakū bisire-be
  3. obtaining one word one mind saying whole stamp model being-ACC
- 
1. daɣame . gurun i bitxe mingyan tangyô jalan de entexeme tutafi . /
  2. dahame . gurun-i bithe minggan tanggū jalan-de enteheme tutafi
  3. obeying state-of script 1000 100 age-in eternally having.held
- 
1. šun usiɣa . sungyari birai gese abqa na i sidende entexeme
  2. šun usiha sunggari bira-i gese abka na-i sidende enteheme
  3. sun star Milky Way-of like sky earth-of between eternally
- 
1. tutambi dere :
  2. tutambi dere
  3. hold likely

'Obtaining the Seal that wholly acts according to the Great Rule and the Great Law, fully obeying the given example unanimously and wholeheartedly, and keeping the script of the empire for thousands and hundreds of generations forever, it is likely to keep up between Heaven and Earth forever like the Sun, the stars, and the Milky Way.'

— From the emperor's preface of 1708 to the *Manju gisun-i buleku bitxe* [*The Dictionary of Manchu*] in the 1771 blockprint of its revised edition called *Nonggime toqtoburya Manju gisun-e buleku bitxe*.

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