

# A Survey of Japanese Studies in Mongolia: Focusing on Choi. Lubsangjab University of Language and Civilization

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In light of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Mongolia and Japan four decades ago in 1972, and the two countries' close geographical location in the North East Asian region, Japanese studies in Mongolia have advanced in the latter two decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of this present century, following the general trend of Japanese studies around the world. The advancement of Japanese studies in Mongolia is still, however, a relatively recent development. In contrast, during the same period of time, great strides have been made by Japanese scholars studying Mongolia, and outstanding Japanese Mongolists lead the world in the field of Mongolian studies.

Mongolia's unequivocal rejection of a communist regime, shift from a centralized command economy to a free market one, and adoption of a democratic political system in 1990 created favorable conditions for boosting broader ties and fostering closer cooperation with Japan in various areas, which has brought their relationship closer to a comprehensive partnership. During Mongolia's transition period (1990–2000), the Japanese government significantly increased its assistance in the form of grant aid and soft loans to Mongolia in order for the country to overcome financial and economic challenges it was going through after the Soviet sponsored socialism collapsed in the early 1990s.

Japanese studies in Mongolia started with the thriving state of Japanese language studies in the 1990s. The first ever Japanese language textbook in Mongolia, compiled by the outstanding Mongolian linguist scholar Choi. Lubsangjab, was published in 1990. This textbook, combined with his Mongolian and Japanese phrasebook, became an encouraging incentive for the enthusiastic young generation in learning the language. Along with these books, he, as Founder and Dean of the Department of Foreign languages of the National University of Mongolia, received an official authorization from the Mongolian Ministry of Education to open a Japanese language section at the aforementioned Department of Foreign Languages in 1975. Since this time, Japanese studies have expanded beyond mere language studies and now cover many different spheres.

A great number of experts and researchers, especially young researchers, have started publishing research articles and books on various themes in Japanese studies. It would be safe to say that after 1990, a new generation of Mongolian scholars specializing in various disciplines of Japanese studies was born. According to statistics, about twenty books and over 180 research articles in the area of Japanese studies were published

between 1988 and 2000.<sup>1</sup>

In connection with the rapid progress and prosperity of bilateral relations and cooperation between the two countries, interest in Japanese studies sharply increased in Mongolia in both academic and cultural areas. Dr. Choi. Lubsangjab's contribution has opened the gate to both the private and public sectors. Outside the public educational sector, Dr. Choi. Lubsangjab established a private university, named as the Academy of Language and Civilization University, in 1993, which has greatly contributed to further promoting Japanese studies in Mongolia. The Department of Japanese studies of this university has graduated 260 experts in Japanese studies including language and culture.

Japanese studies in Mongolia mainly covers the following areas:

- Political and economical system of Japan
- Japanese language and literature
- Education and legal system of Japan
- Tradition and culture of Japan
- Japanese foreign policy
- Mongolian-Japanese relations

Some important books that have been published in the Mongolian language in recent years include:

- Bira, Sh. et. al. *Mongolian and Japanese Relations (present and ancient time)*. Ulaanbaatar, 2001.
- T. Munkhtsetseg, T. *Efficiency of Japanese Investment, Loans and Assistance to Mongolia*. Ulaanbaatar, 2004.
- Namjin, T. *Schematizing Japan*. Ulaanbaatar, 1999.
- Lubsangjab, Choi. et. al. *Mongolian and Japanese Phrasebook*. Ulaanbaatar, 1990.
- Demberel, J. *Mongolian Japanese Dictionary*. Ulaanbaatar, 2012.

An extended symposium on Japanese studies was organized on the occasion of the 35th anniversary of the establishment of Mongolian-Japanese diplomatic relations in 2007. The papers of this symposium were published in a separate brochure and booklet in Mongolian. Thanks to the advancement of Japanese studies in Mongolia, the Japanese language has become one of the most studied foreign languages in Mongolia, after English.

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1 Materials from the symposium on Japanese studies in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, 2007, p. 22.

At the present time Japanese language is taught in over thirty universities and colleges in Mongolia. Japanese language is taught not only in the capital city Ulaanbaatar, but also in other big cities, such as Darkhan, Erdenet, and in high schools in other regional centers, such as Bayankhongor, Uburkhangai, Baga Nuur and so on. According to one survey by the Japan Foundation, the number of Japanese language learners increased 3.2 times compared to the previous period, and one out of every 278 people in Mongolia has studied or is still studying the Japanese language.<sup>2</sup>

As far as Japanese studies in Mongolia is concerned, there are a number of cultural subjects deserving further comparative research. For example, I conducted comparative research on two cognate indigenous folk religions of the Japanese and Mongolian people—Shamanism in Mongolia and Shinto in Japan—at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken) in Kyoto from 2012–2013, and published a paper on this topic.<sup>3</sup>

As the first visiting research scholar from Mongolia at Nichibunken, and as the President of the Choi. Lubsangjab University of Language and Civilization, I am planning to direct the University's efforts to enhance Japanese studies outside of basic language learning and study, so that the university will contribute to the advancement of Japanese studies in Mongolia. As a first step in this respect, in the future I plan to organize a workshop under the theme of the role of the Choi. Lubsangjab University in developing Japanese studies in Mongolia in cooperation with Nichibunken.

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2 Materials of the symposium on Japanese studies in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, 2007, p. 77 (cited from the Japan's Foundation Survey Report, 2003–2004).

3 *Research Journal of the Choi. Lubsangjab University of Language and Civilization*. Ulaanbaatar, 2014, pp. 35–37.