

# A New Script for the Mong Language

Based on a Theoretical Generic Southeast-Asian Orthographic Model

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## Abstract

While Mong has been written for many years using the Romanized Popular Alphabet, its outward appearance is that of a Europeanized or colonial culture, despite a deep history and rich culture of its own. As something of a hypothetical exercise, a script is suggested here as an alternative to RPA, which attempts to retain something of an Asian written tradition, yet distinctive enough that it might appear, at first glance, to have been recovered from the ‘mists of time’. The basis of the script system is none other than Pallava, the ancestor to most SE Asian scripts south of China. It is hypothetical in the sense that it is artificial, somewhat old-fashioned, and unlikely to be suddenly adopted by Mong peoples. But it may prove curious or inspiring to Mong language users interested in giving emphasis to the unique achievements of Mong literature and culture.

## 1 The current script

The Mong (or Hmong) language dialects were without a known written form until Smalley, Bertrais and Barney devised the Romanized Popular Alphabet in the 1950s, using an ingenious reassignment of Latin glyphs. This enabled all of the phonemes as well as the tones to be represented and, most conveniently, allowed the typewriters of missionaries and scholars to capture the complexities of the language in a fairly simple manner.

This convenience transfers directly into the modern age by allowing Mong users to read and write on a computer with a normal **qwerty** keyboard, and without the need for a dedicated Unicode assignment, or special typesetting software. This use of the Latin alphabet also makes European languages like English appear less foreign. Both of these things in turn may help in some way with the acquiring of education, and of a confidence that Mong peoples are not being ‘left behind’.

These are positive points. There are, however, some subtle problems with the way the Latin alphabet has suddenly become the outward face of Mong culture. First is the manner and circumstance of the adoption, coming on top of a well-meaning invasion of foreign religious and cultural values. In many minds, particularly of those elder members struggling to preserve traditions and ancient knowledge, the benefits of western influence would be questioned, and the writing which appeared would only serve as a reminder of the potentially downhill cultural path.

There is also the rather uncomfortable assignment of many phonemes to Latin glyphs which already have clear and widely known phonemic values. For people already familiar with the usual pronunciation of Latin glyphs, such lettering as **r z x ts np** are non-standard, and surprising.

Then, while the use of select letters **b d g j m s v** gives (without any clear rationale) the tonal markers, a shift in linguistic interpretation is required to make sense of them. This is not a major problem for Mong users yet to learn Latin-based languages, for these are merely symbols, practically arbitrary; although it is a little confusing that an initial and final **s** for example, are different beasts. One day they will see, like any non-Mong reader knowing the common phonemic qualities of these glyphs, that they are using a foreign script which has been cannibalized and contorted to fit the peculiarities of Mong.

## 2 The Pahawh script

This interesting glyph set (**Phaj hauj hmoob**) was devised in 1959 by the illiterate but inspired **Soob Lwj Yaj**. Although intriguing, it can be seen that the glyphs pay no heed to phonetic relationships, despite a clear desire for internal structure.

The 60 consonants are arranged into 3 near-identical sets of 20 glyphs, the 2nd and 3rd set distinguished by diacritics. However, the diacritics have no intrinsic meaning and give no clue to pronunciation. Then there are 2 major groups of toned-vowel glyphs, divided into 4 sets of 13 vowel glyphs. Again, the 2nd, 3rd and 4th of each set are identical except for diacritics. It is not clear why the 8 tones are arranged into 2 groups of completely different base vowel glyph elements. Phonetically speaking, Mong (or in this case White Hmong) does not fall naturally into related sets as hinted at in this script system.

Oddly, the toned-vowel component is written before the consonant, so the syllable is not seen as a sequence of phonemes produced over a span of time. This points even more to the notion that the script system is more symbolic or abstract than the usual syllabic orthographies, and ultimately less practical, being difficult to memorize and prone to error through misplaced diacritics.

Even so, it is an important cultural relic, and may express something of a Mong linguistic ideal. Any script invented for Mong should take note of this subtle aspect, this sense of how the people's language should *appear* to the world.

### 3 Inventing a script

If we were to try and reconstruct a new and complete orthography for Mong, there are a number of ways we could proceed. One is to adopt a logographic scheme where symbols stand in for each word. For the many Mong peoples living in China, adoption of Chinese has already become a necessity; but theoretically, spoken Mong may easily be attached to the given glyphs just as any spoken dialect of Chinese can. This at least provides a written form, but at the price of what has often felt like subjugation within the Chinese empire.

Another method might involve imagining appropriate glyphs standing in for each syllable of Mong, a syllabary. This would require (at first approximation) some  $60 \times 104 =$  more than 6,000 symbols, much more than the largest existing syllabaries. The amount of effort is equivalent to designing logograms for each word, and Chinese already fits that bill.

Another method involves taking the significant deconstructed elements—toned phonemes—and imagining appropriate glyphs as in the Pahawh system. This gives some  $60 + 104 = 164$  symbols. Ideally, the form of each glyph should be tuned to the aesthetics of Mong culture, a difficult task for non-Mong (and younger generations of Mong, perhaps) to undertake.

Rather than reworking the system of Soob Lwj Yaj, and using the benefits of both phonological scholarship and historical hindsight, a system of phonetic symbols would seem most useful, something along the lines of Smalley's deconstruction, but appearing more related to the culture, or at least geo-social environment, than letters from ancient Italy. The size of this set would be roughly  $60 + 13 + 8 = 81$  glyphs.

### 4 Pallava and a hypothetical re-invention

In around the 6th century AD, a script from South India arrived in Southeast Asia and spawned writing systems in each of the cultures who came into contact with it, where before there was no such thing. This was Pallava, the ancestor of Mon-Burmese, Khmer of Cambodia, Kawi and others of Indonesia and neighbouring Pacific regions, and nearly all the Tai language scripts including Lanna, Thai, Lao, Tai-Lue and Dai-Deuhong. If we imagine the Mong language poised on the edge of this linguistic region, and with Chinese writing on their northern flank, we might see them adopting the exciting and attractive Pallava model, like their southern neighbours.

The significant thing about the earliest experience of contact with Pallava is that it seems not to have been urged by colonialist or imperialist activity, but more a genuine excitement over written knowledge and intellectual possibilities. Certainly, the earliest epigraphical evidence exhibits pride and beauty.

Looking to Pallava as a base system is also a way to conceive a *generic* SE Asian script. We can then imagine a process of awareness–adoption–variation leading to a Mong-style script related to the generic model. This is the basis of the system outlined below.

But as well as acquiring the source glyphs and adapting them to the phonemes of Mong, there are basic design issues to consider. It was decided here that the glyphs needn't be efficient beyond

being phonetically consistent, that the glyphs should be symbolic of a mature linguistic history, and they should be attractive, possibly giving a visual impression similar to that of the Pahawh script. As well, for stylistic integrity, certain glyphs may be reflections or rotations of others, and there should be some reusability of glyphic components.

The result is more than a transliteration of Smalley's RPA. Unlike the Latin script, Pallava had plenty of phonemes and extra useful glyphs directly suited to most SE Asian languages. The important contribution of RPA to the script presented here (apart from the desire for phonetic consistency) is the method of marking tones after the syllable. This is a less cluttered method than that used for Tai language scripts, and, as will be seen, provides a pleasing horizontal pace for what are otherwise very short words.

## 5 An example of the proposed script

Before laying out the table of glyphs and explaining their derivation, here is a sample text:

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dlh	/tʰ/	ᨆ	Cluster made from <b>th</b> and <b>l</b> . Green Mong only.
f	/f/	ᨇ	As in most Tai scripts, formed from <b>p</b> with a tail added.
h	/h/	ᨈ	From Pallava /ha/, still recognizable in Lanna, Thai, Lao, Tai-Lue and Burmese.
hl	/tʰ/	ᨉ	Hybrid of <b>h</b> and <b>l</b> ; rather than a simple ligature, this has a singularity consistent with the /tʰ/ phoneme itself.
hm	/m̥/	ᨊ	Cluster made from <b>h</b> and <b>m</b> . White Hmong phoneme.
hml	/m̥l/	ᨋ	Cluster made from <b>h</b> , <b>m</b> and <b>l</b> . White Hmong phoneme.
hn	/n̥/	ᨌ	Cluster made from <b>h</b> and <b>n</b> . White Hmong phoneme.
hny	/ɲ̥/	ᨍ	Cluster made from <b>h</b> and <b>ny</b> . White Hmong phoneme.
k	/k/	ᨎ	From Pallava /ka/; still recognizable in many SE Asian scripts.
kh	/kʰ/	ᨏ	From Pallava /kha/; still recognizable in Burmese, Lanna, Tai-Lue, Dai-Deuhong, Khmer.
l	/l/	ᨐ	As in most SE Asian scripts; and curly to distinguish it better from glyph <b>h</b> .
m	/m/	ᨑ	From Pallava, still recognizable in Burmese, Lanna, Tai-Lue, Dai-Deuhong, Khmer.
ml	/ml/	ᨒ	Cluster made from <b>m</b> and <b>l</b> . Also mirrors White Hmong phoneme <b>hm</b> .
n	/n/	ᨓ	From late Pallava, still recognizable in Lanna and Tai-Lue.
nd	/nd/	ᨔ	Cluster made from the <i>pre-nasal</i> marker (see below) and <b>d</b> , built into a unit width. The tendency to stack consonants vertically is a trait of Pallava. White Hmong phoneme.
ndh	/ndʰ/	ᨕ	Cluster made from the <i>pre-nasal</i> marker and <b>dh</b> , built into a unit width. White Hmong phoneme.
nk	/ɲg/	ᨖ	Cluster made from the <i>pre-nasal</i> marker and <b>k</b> , built into a unit width.
nkh	/ɲgʰ/	ᨗ	Cluster made from the <i>pre-nasal</i> marker and <b>kh</b> , built into a unit width.
np	/mb/	ᨘ	Cluster made from the <i>pre-nasal</i> marker and <b>p</b> , built into a unit width.
nph	/mbʰ/	ᨙ	Cluster made from the <i>pre-nasal</i> marker and <b>ph</b> , built into a unit width.
nq	/NG/	ᨚ	Cluster made from the <i>pre-nasal</i> marker and <b>q</b> , built into a unit width.
nqh	/NGʰ/	ᨛ	Cluster made from the <i>pre-nasal</i> marker and <b>qh</b> , built into a unit width.
nr	/ɲt/	᨜	Cluster made from the <i>pre-nasal</i> marker and <b>r</b> , built into a unit width.

nrh	/nɾ <sup>h</sup> /		Cluster made from the <i>pre-nasal</i> marker and rh, built into a unit width.
nt	/nt/		Cluster made from the <i>pre-nasal</i> marker and t, built into a unit width.
nth	/nt <sup>h</sup> /		Cluster made from the <i>pre-nasal</i> marker and th, built into a unit width.
ny	/ɲ/		From Pallava /ñā/. Most SE Asian scripts made a much more complex glyph of this.
p	/p/		From Pallava /pa/; still recognizable in many SE Asian scripts, although often given the value /b/.
ph	/p <sup>h</sup> /		As is common, the aspirated form is based on the Pallava-based /p/ but with a bifurcation at the base.
pɭ	/pɭ/		Cluster made from p and ɭ. Not to be confused with an hɭ cluster, for reasons given above.
pɭh	/pɭ <sup>h</sup> /		Cluster made from ph and ɭ.
q	/q/		From Pallava /ga/ and recognizable as the /k/ or /g/ of most SE Asian scripts. Since this was often a redundant glyph, it may be used here for the rear articulation. Also mirrors the glyph shape of p.
qh	/q <sup>h</sup> /		From Pallava /gha/ with variations used for /kh/ in Lanna, Thai, Khmer. Since this was often a redundant glyph, it may be used here for the rear articulation.
r	/ɽ/		Using a tail under the glyph for t, as has been used in Pallava for a second component retroflex /ɽ/ in clusters.
rh	/ɽ <sup>h</sup> /		Using a tail under the glyph for th, as has been used in Pallava for a second component retroflex /ɽ/ in clusters.
s	/s̥/		From Pallava /ṣa/; still recognizable in Thai, Lanna, Balinese.
t	/t/		From Pallava /ta/; still recognizable in most Tai scripts. This glyph also mirrors that of s.
th	/t <sup>h</sup> /		Originally from Pallava /tha/; here using the form taken for the <i>thaw-thung</i> of Thai.
ts	/t̪s̥/		Cluster made from t and s.
tsh	/t̪s̥ <sup>h</sup> /		Cluster made from th and s.
tx	/ts/		Cluster made from t and x.
txh	/ts <sup>h</sup> /		Cluster made from th and x.
v	/v/		From Pallava /va/; still recognizable in Lanna, Burmese, Tai-Lue and Dai-Deuhong (although equally used for /w/). The pointed form differs from the usual oval, and is intended to evoke a leaf or water-drop.

x	/s/	𑄣	From Pallava /sa/, as used in ancient Mon (otherwise this is the original /ya/ glyph); still recognizable in Lanna, Tai-Lue and Burmese. Also mirrors the glyph for ny.
xy	/ʃ/	𑄤	From Pallava /śa/; still recognizable in Thai and Balinese. Also mirrors the glyph of m.
y	/j/	𑄥	Originally from Pallava /ya/ but then, as with the form in Thai and Lao, has been rotated. Also mirrors the th glyph.
z	/z/	𑄦	From Pallava stand-alone /ra/, the retroflex approximating the Mong phoneme. Also resembles the IPA symbol for the nearby phoneme /ʒ/, and mirrors the White Hmong phoneme d.
'	/ʔ/	𑄧	From Pallava /ʔa/; supports an initial vowel as is common in SE Asian scripts. There are many variations of the Pallava glyph, Khmer being the closest to this form. Also mirrors the glyph of ph.

## 6.2 Vowels

Here and below, the consonant **qh** is used to display the relevant glyph in position.

a	/a/	𑄨	From Thai and Lao inter-consonantal /a/. The positioning of open-back vowels and front vowels in the Pallava scheme has been swapped; in Pallava and later scripts, /ā/ is after its consonant and /i/ and /ī/ are above theirs.
e	/e/	𑄩	Recognizable in most Tai and SE Asian scripts, but here put after its consonant instead of before. The experimental New Thai script of King Rama VI (1917) used a similar form in this position.
i	/i/	𑄪	Based on <b>e</b> , but given a point to show the tighter articulation. Both this and /e/ are front vowels, and appear at the ‘face’ of their consonant. Also looks like the <b>i</b> of Latin-based languages.
o	/ɔ/	𑄫	From Lao inter-consonantal /ɔ/. Pairs with <b>a</b> , and being the rounded form of /a/, it is turned over.
u	/u/	𑄬	As with all scripts coming from Pallava, the close-back vowels sit below their consonant. This pairs with <b>w</b> , and being the rounded form of /u/, it is turned over.
w	/ʉ/	𑄭	The unturned (unrounded) form of <b>u</b> .
ai	/ai/	𑄮	Forms of <b>a</b> and <b>i</b> combined into single glyph. This bears strong resemblance to the /ai/ glyphs of most Tai scripts, but is put after its consonant instead of before.
au	/au/	𑄯	Curves of <b>a</b> and <b>u</b> combined above.
aw	/əʉ/	𑄰	Curves of <b>a</b> and <b>w</b> combined above. Also retains a w-shape.
ia	/iə/	𑄱	Forms of <b>i</b> and <b>a</b> combined into single glyph. White Hmong phoneme.
ua	/uə/	𑄲	Curves of <b>u</b> and <b>a</b> combined below.

### 6.3 Nasalization markers

aa	/ã,aŋ/	ᷔ	The post-nasalization glyph is a long-tailed stem, similar to the /ŋ/ of Lao. Green Mong only.
ee	/ẽ,eŋ/	ᷕ	The glyph of e is joined to the post-nasalization glyph.
oo	/õ,oŋ/	ᷖ	The glyph of o is joined to the post-nasalization glyph, providing an aesthetic ‘wrap-around’ figure reminiscent of the Pallava /ra/ which still exists in Lanna and Burmese.
n-	/m,n,ŋ,N/	ᷗ	From Pallava /ṃ/, placed upon a stem. The high circle is still used in many SE Asian scripts for the post-nasalization of a vowel. Here it is used as a prefix, the <i>pre-nasal</i> marker, and this is the stand-alone form. Some simpler consonant-glyphs have the circular symbol fixed directly to their top. For the already complex cluster phonemes, the stand-alone prefix is used:
nc	/ndj/	ᷘ	Prenasalization with cluster c.
nch	/ndj <sup>h</sup> /	ᷙ	Prenasalization with cluster ch.
ndl	/ndl/	ᷚ	Prenasalization with cluster dl. Green Mong only.
ndlh	/ndl <sup>h</sup> /	ᷛ	Prenasalization with cluster dlh. Green Mong only.
nts	/ŋdz/	ᷜ	Prenasalization with cluster ts.
ntsh	/ŋdz <sup>h</sup> /	ᷝ	Prenasalization with cluster tsh.
ntx	/ndz/	ᷞ	Prenasalization with cluster tx.
ntxh	/ndz <sup>h</sup> /	ᷟ	Prenasalization with cluster txh.
npl	/mbl/	ᷠ	Prenasalization with cluster pl.
nplh	/mb <sup>h</sup> /	ᷡ	Prenasalization with cluster plh.

### 6.4 Tone markers

The letters of RPA remain, but are more symbolic than their Latin form. Each tone marker also has a dot below, which helps break up phrases into syllables, for clarity and a visual sense of rhythm.

b	<i>bright/high-level</i>	ᷢ	The stem serves to point to the higher pitch.
d	<i>dipping/low-rise</i>	ᷣ	The stem serves to point out the rise that occurs after an otherwise low tone.
g	<i>gutsy/mid-falling</i>	ᷤ	The tight spiral serves to show something of the energy of this tone. This shape is also mirrored in glyph kh.
j	<i>jump/falling</i>	ᷥ	The upside form shows better the fall.
m	<i>muttered/low-short</i>	ᷦ	This form has a cramped feel about it. The shape is also mirrored in glyph qh.

s	<i>sunken/low-level</i>	⸥	A snakey curve leads to the low ground.
v	<i>vaporized/rising</i>	⸦	Similar to the usual IPA and Pinyin symbol ˇ for a rising tone.
–	<i>none/middle</i>	‡	A simple symbol for mid-height; there is no reason this toneme shouldn't have its own glyph.

## 6.5 Numerals

There is a set of numerals common across Mon-Burmese, Tai-Lue, Dai-Deuhong and Lanna scripts which could be used. Otherwise, the near-universal set of Arabic numerals would do just as well, as long as a visual break between numerals and words is made, as is done in Thai. This, because of the potential ambiguity between 0 1 5 6 7 8 9 and glyphs for *v e z b ai ndh g*.

For maximum disambiguation, the following set of generic Tai/Mon numerals might be appropriate:

၀၁၂၃၄၅၆၇၈၉

၀	Mi̋b̋	၁	M̋i̋b̋	၂	Űb̋	၃	Ũ̋b̋	၄	ṽ̋b̋	၅	ṽ̋b̋
1	ib	2	ob	3	peb	4	plaub	5	tsib		
၆	ṽ̋i̋!	၇	Ǻ̋j̋!	၈	Yi̋ṽ̋	၉	ṽ̋j̋!	၁၀	k̋i̋ṽ̋		
6	rau	7	xyaa	8	yim	9	cuaj	10	kaum		

Otherwise, the Pahawh numerals are interesting:

၀၄၃၈၁၃၆၀၃၃၃၃ and | for 10;

၃၈၃၆ ṽ̋ṽ̋ṽ̋! 238 tug ntoo.

## 7 Postscript

Since this paper was written, the author has posted a summary explanation of the script onto the Omniglot website at [www.omniglot.com/writing/newmong/](http://www.omniglot.com/writing/newmong/), together with a downloadable font. It is hoped that Mong/Hmong culture may be re-admired by writers and readers, through such a simple artifice as expressing it with an attractive script, and in a form perhaps more reminiscent of its origins or earlier heydays.