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Printing Tibetan Books in Russia in the 19th to Early 20th Centuries

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(St. Petersburg)

Many hundreds of Tibetan books, big and small, were printed in Russia for religious and scholarly purposes from traditional woodblocks or metal types. This was the result of a unique coincidence of events in the history of Russia which made Tibetan Buddhism an important and inseparable part of Russia's spiritual heritage.

In 1237–1240 Russia was subject to a major Mongol invasion. At this time the Mongols led by Batu, a grandson of Genghis Khan, conquered the whole of Russia. As centuries passed, Russia became stronger and started to expand eastwards. In the 17th century Russia again met the Mongols on her new eastern borders. Such peoples of Mongol stock as the Kalmucks in southern European Russia and the Buriats in Eastern Siberia became Russian subjects. By that time Tibetan Buddhism had become widespread among the Mongols.

As no efficient control on the border between Russia and China existed until 1727, Buddhist clerics came to Russia quite freely. In 1741 Siberian authorities made a statistical survey of the area. It showed that there existed eleven Buddhist temples with 150 monks. This information was sent to St. Petersburg, and the Empress Elizabeth signed a decree acknowledging this Buddhist community. That year is regarded as the founding date of Buddhism in Russia.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed rapid growth in the number of Buddhist monks and in the building of new monasteries (*datsans* < Tib. *grwa-tshang*). In 1822 there were already 2,502 monks, and nine years later there were already 4,637.¹ The growth of the Buddhist clergy caused anxiety to the local authorities. A special commission sent from St. Petersburg in 1831 was headed by Baron Schilling von Canstadt (1786–1837) who was himself very much interested in Tibetan Buddhism. Having arrived in Siberia, Baron Schilling established a sort of a “copy centre” where local monks copied books and compiled catalogues of different editions of the Buddhist Canon. Having arrived in Eastern Siberia he met there the founder of the Mongol studies in Russia Josef Kowalewski, who

¹ Galdanova *et al.* (1983: 12–33).

was himself collecting Mongolian and Tibetan books, and the British missionaries who had established a school for the Buriat Mongols.² Kowalewski wrote in his diary:

“For a long time Baron Schilling has been tirelessly searching for the books relating to Central Asia and achieved an astonishing success. His present-day library of Tibetan and Mongolian works is a rare scholarly treasure. The Baron being himself an amateur of the Eastern scriptures, offers the collected materials to scholars for studying. His private library is always open to everyone. In my opinion, his stay in this area influenced the Buriats immensely. There appeared experts in the Tibetan and even in Sanskrit languages, painters, *engravers*; the monks began to inquire more deeply into the foundations of their faith and to read books; there were discovered many books which had been before claimed as being non-extant [...] I examined the printing blocks carved by the Buriat monks for the theological dictionary which was printed in China in five languages: Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese, Manchu and Mongolian. However, the Baron ordered to engrave only words in three languages which are most-needed by our Buriat monks: Sanskrit, Tibetan and Mongolian. The engraving is noteworthy for its distinctiveness and correctness.”³

The wooden blocks of this dictionary (fig. 1) were brought by Baron Schilling to St. Petersburg.⁴ However, the dictionary itself was printed long after his death with an introduction in German and the German title *Buddhistische Triglotte*.⁵

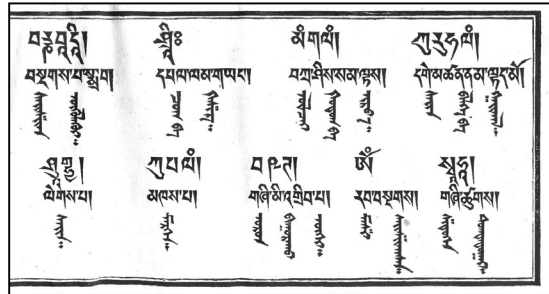


Fig. 1 Fragment of a page of the Sanskrit-Tibetan-Mongolian dictionary engraved in 1831 in Eastern Siberia at the initiative of Baron Schilling von Canstadt. Printed in St. Petersburg, 1859.

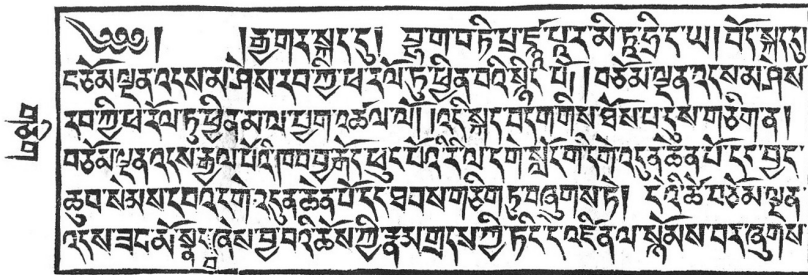
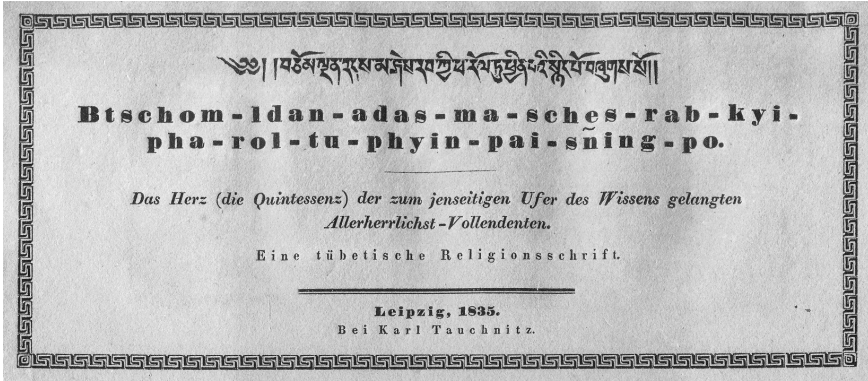
² Kowalewski collected a number of Tibetan books printed on Russian paper at Siberian *datsans* by Buriat monks. At present they are kept at the St. Petersburg University Library. See Uspensky (2004).

³ Kowalewski (1831: ff. 113a, 116b–117a). Emphasis added. The dictionary mentioned is well-known under its Chinese title 五譯合璧集要 *Wu yi he bi ji yao*.

⁴ At present they are kept at the Institute of Oriental Studies (St. Petersburg Branch). I have no information as to whether their set is a complete one.

⁵ Schiefner (1859).

Besides being a statesman Baron Schilling was also an inventor, and he made experiments in lithography printing of the texts in Oriental languages. In 1835 during his trip to Western Europe he brought with him some books collected in Eastern Siberia which he later presented to the Bibliothèque de l'Institut in Paris.⁶ It seems that he also brought with him the wooden printed blocks of two small Tibetan texts which were copied and printed in Leipzig; the *Heart Sūtra* (figs. 2a/b) and a prayer text entitled *sMon lam bcu tham 'byor ba'i lhag smon bsngo ba bzhugs so*.



Figs. 2a/b Cover and first page of the *Heart Sūtra* printed in Leipzig in 1835. The wood blocks that served as a model for this edition are likely to have been brought from Eastern Siberia by Baron Schilling von Canstadt.

The movable metal Tibetan type was made for the printing house of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg in the late 1830s.⁷ The first Tibetan book printed in 1843 with this type (fig. 3) was the *Sūtra of the Wise and the Fool* (*Dzangs blum dpe sna tshogs bstan pa'i mdo bzhugs so*) with

⁶ About these Tibetan books see Bacot (1924).

⁷ The British missionaries in Selenginsk (Eastern Siberia) had produced Tibetan movable letters around the same time. Robert Yuille used this font in 1839 on the cover page of a Mongolian textbook (fig. 4). However, it does not seem to have been used elsewhere.

the preface in German by the academician Isaak Jacob Schmidt (1779–1847). This type had also been used in Schmidt’s Tibetan-Russian dictionary printed the same year. Prior to that it is found in his Tibetan Grammar of 1839 and his Tibetan-German dictionary of 1841.

༄༄༄༄ | །འཇངས་སྐྱུན་ཞེས་བྱ་བའི་མདོ། | །བམ་པོ་དང་པོ། | །དཔེ་སྐྱོའོ་ཞེས་བསྟན་པའི་ལེའུ། | །འདི་སྐད་
བདག་གིས་བོས་བ་རུས་གཅིག་ན། | །བཅོམ་ལྷན་འདས་ཡུལ་མ་གཏའི་དཀྱིལ་ལོ་ལོ་རྩམ་བར་རྒྱལ་བ་ན་བཞུགས་དེ།
མདོན་བར་རྒྱུགས་བར་སངས་རྒྱས་ནས། | །རིང་པོར་མ་ལོན་པ་ཞིག་ན་འདི་སྐད་རུ་དགོངས་པར་བྱུང་དོ། | །སེམས་
ཅན་འདི་དག་ནི་ཡུན་རིང་པོ་ནས་བྱིན་གྱི་ལོག་གིས་ཡོངས་སུ་བསྐྱེད་དེ། | །བསྟན་ཅིང་བཅོམས་སུ་ཡང་ཤོན་ཏེ་
དཀར་བས། | །ཇི་སྲིད་རུ་འཇིག་རྟེན་རུ་བཞུགས་ཀྱང་ཡན་པའི་དོན་མེད་ཀྱིས། | །དེས་ན་ལྷག་མ་མ་ལུས་པའི་བྱང་བ་

Fig. 3 A page of the *Sūtra of the Wise and the Fool* ('Dzangs blun zhes bya ba'i mdo). St. Petersburg, 1843.

These movable Tibetan letters were in continual use in Russian scholarly publications since 1843 until the early 1960s. It was with this type that numerous Tibetan texts were printed within the famous series *Bibliotheca Buddhica* which was published by the Russian Academy of Sciences under the supervision of Th. Stcherbatsky (1866–1942).

Meanwhile in the second half of the 19th century traditional woodblock printing in the *datsans* of Eastern Siberia received a new impetus. By 1887 twenty-nine of the then existing thirty-four *datsans* had established their own printing houses (Tib. *par-khang*) which had already printed by this time about 600 separate works.⁸ The most prolific printers were the following monasteries: Gusinoozerskiy datsan (dGa’ldan dar-rgyas gling), Aninskiy datsan (dGa’ldan bshad-sgrub-gling), Atsagatskiy datsan (dGa’ldan dar-rgyas-gling), Aginskiy datsan (bDe-chen lhun-grub-gling), Tsugolskiy da-

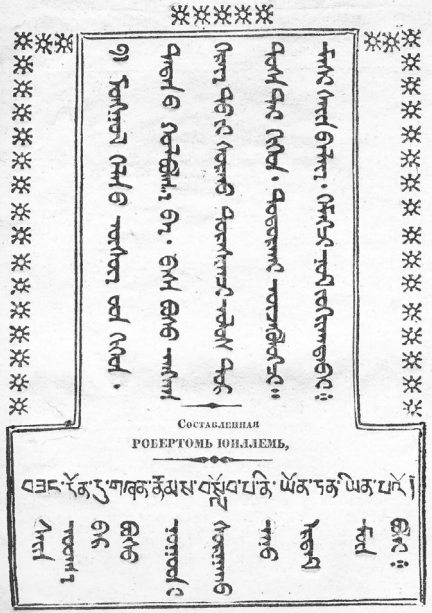


Fig. 4 Mongolian Grammar by Robert Yuille with a Tibetan title. Selenginsk, 1839.

⁸ Galdanova et al. (1983: 75).

tsan (bKra-shis chos-'phel-gling), Egetuyevskiy datsan (Dam-chos rab-rgyas-gling), Tsongolskiy datsan (dPal-ldan 'Bras-spungs-gling) and Chitsanovskiy datsan (dGa'-ldan chos-'phel-gling). In many cases Tibetan books printed in Beijing, Amdo and other places served as originals for Buriat printers who often reproduced the original colophons (fig. 5).

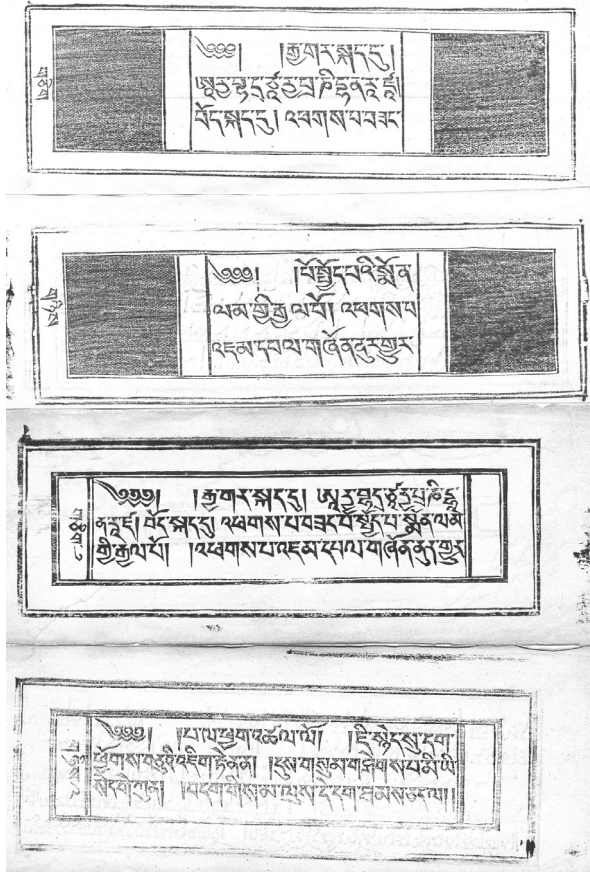


Fig. 5 Two different editions of the *Bhadracaryā-praṇidhāna-rajā* printed in Eastern Siberia.

The *datsans* printed books on different subjects. However, no collections in many volumes such as the Buddhist Canon (*bKa'-gyur* and *bsTan'-gyur*) or Collected Works (*gsung-'bum*) by Tibetan authors were printed there. This also refers to separate but voluminous canonical texts (like some of the *Prajñāpāramitā* sūtras).⁹ Only one-volume texts, big and small were printed,

⁹ The sets of Buddhist Canons as well as numerous Collected Works were imported by

mostly on white Russian-made paper. In a few cases these one-volume books contained many smaller separate works forming a collection of texts for a daily use or a ritual cycle.¹⁰ Texts relating to Buddhist rituals and traditional monk education comprise the majority of publications; many protective charms and pictures of the deities were also printed. The books in the Tibetan language largely outnumbered the books in Mongolian, the native language of the local population (fig. 6).

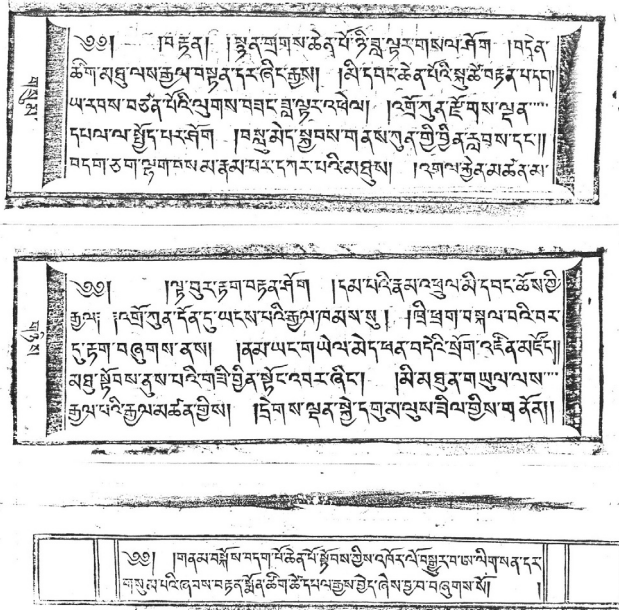


Fig. 6 A prayer for the longevity of the Russian tsar Alexandre III (reigned 1881–1894).

Books in Mongolian were also Buddhist texts, for the most part—canonical sutras, prayers, didactic tales, images, amulets, etc. (fig. 7). As with the case of Tibetan books their originals for the most part were texts that had been previously printed outside Russia. However, some new translations

the *datsans*. During his inspection in 1831 Baron Schilling discovered eleven sets of the *bKa'-gyur* (four of them printed ones) and one set of the *bsTan-gyur*. See Kowalewsky (1831: f. 117a–b).

¹⁰ E.g., such a collection of texts on Hayagrīva (rTa-mgrin) worship was printed at the Aginskiy datsan Monastery. It was accompanied by a catalogue entitled *Chos sde chen po bde chen lhun grub gling mchog tu dpar du bsgrub pa'i thu bkwan rin po che'i rta mgrin chos skor kyī pa pa'i kar* [sic] *chags*.

from Tibetan into Mongolian were made by the Buriat monks and printed in local *datsans*.¹¹ A considerable number of Tibetan-Mongolian bilingual texts as well as dictionaries were also printed. Some of the *datsans* regularly published catalogues of their editions both in Tibetan and in Mongolian.¹²



Fig. 7 Printed protective amulet.

The large amount of printing activities of Buddhist monasteries caused anxiety among the Russian Christian clergy and the local civil and military administration.¹³ From time to time Russian administration checked the printing houses of the *datsans* and hindered their activities. In June 1889 the Governor-General of the Amur Province forbade book printing in all *datsans*. Though the printing activity continued in the following years it had to be reconciled with the demands of local administration for more efficient official control. As, in pre-revolutionary Russia, every printed book had to

¹¹ E.g., the biography of Marpa-lotsawa, about which see Uspensky (2001: 271, No. 219).

¹² Garmayeva (2004: 441).

¹³ In pre-1917 Russia every book had to be granted a preliminary permission from the official censorship.

be granted a preliminary approval from the censorship, printing without such an approval in the Siberian monasteries was thus considered as illegal if it was discovered. So the local Russian authorities demanded that the Head Lama acted as the censor because he was a person officially appointed by the Russian Czar. The Head Lama of Eastern Siberia¹⁴ several times affirmed the faithfulness of the books printed at the *datsans* before Russian authorities with his personal signature and official seal. The Head Lama Gonboyev who maintained this position in 1878–1896, inscribed and approved books printed in the local *datsans* both in Tibetan and Mongolian at least three times: in 1881, 1883, 1885. The inscription of approval was a standard one (fig. 8): “Upon my consideration this book is a correct one. This is certified with my signature and my official seal.”¹⁵

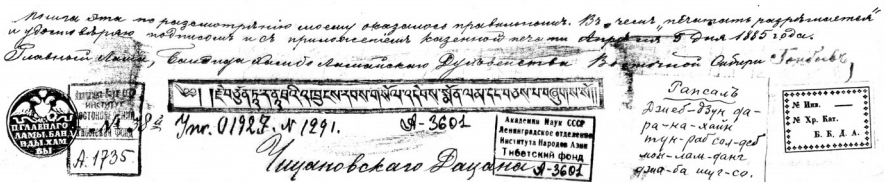


Fig. 8 A Tibetan printed book with a written endorsement by the Head Lama of Eastern Siberia confirmed with his official seal.

In 1911 the Office of the Head Lama compiled a catalogue of books printed in 31 *datsans*. It contains 1,696 entries of Tibetan and Mongolian titles. Though it is the most complete of the existing lists of the monastic woodblock printing it is not an exhaustive one.¹⁶

Agvan Dorjiyev (1853–1938), the famous “debate partner” (*mtshan-zhabs mkhan-po*) of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, also contributed to Tibetan

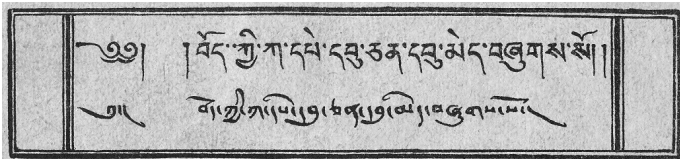


Fig. 9 Short manual of Tibetan writing printed by the publishing house established by Agvan Dorjiyev. St. Petersburg, 1908.

“Naran” (“Sun” in Mongolian) which printed books in standard Mongolian and in a new font created by himself. However, only a small book on Tibetan script (fig. 9) was printed in St. Petersburg by this publishing house. Also he acquired in St. Petersburg movable Tibetan and Mongolian metal

book printing in Russia. He founded in St. Petersburg a Buriat Mongol publishing house named

¹⁴ His official Russian-Tibetan-Sanskrit title was “Glavnyi Lama Bandida Khambo” (*blama pandita mkhan-po*), the word “glavnyi” being Russian for “head.”

¹⁵ Galdanova *et al.* (1983: 74–79), Garmayeva (2004: 435–437).

¹⁶ Rinchen (1959: 79–121).

letters, which were later used for printing books at the Atsagatskiy datsan, his residence in Eastern Siberia.¹⁷

After the 1917 Russian Revolution printing activities of the *datsans* continued. In 1923 the Soviet administration undertook a checking of the monastic printing houses. It revealed that the Aginskiy datsan possessed woodblocks for printing 34,864 pages, and the Tsugolskiy datsan, 11,189 pages.¹⁸ In 1925 the Aginskiy datsan Monastery carved new woodblocks of the famous Tibetan-Mongolian dictionary of Buddhist terminology *The Source of the Wise* (*mKhas pa'i 'byung gnas / Merged yarqu-yin oron*) and printed it for the newly established Learned Committee of the Mongolian People's Republic.¹⁹ However, in early 1930s the Soviet domestic politics developed a strong anticlericalism and within a decade all the *datsans* in Eastern Siberia were closed and their printing houses and libraries destroyed. Though some of the *datsans* were reopened after the Second World War, their printing activities have never resumed (fig. 10). Despite this sad fact a considerable part of their book production escaped destruction and was moved as “cultural relics” to Soviet museums and institutes.²⁰



Fig. 10 Ruins of the printing house (*par-khang*) at the Aninskiy datsan Monastery (dGa'-ldan bshad-sgrub-gling). August 2004.

¹⁷ Garmayeva (2004: 450).

¹⁸ Garmayeva (2004: 441).

¹⁹ Uspensky (2001: 427–429, No. 827).

²⁰ E.g., a great number of books and icons were brought in the late 1930s to Leningrad from the destroyed Aninskiy datsan Monastery. Now they constitute the bulk of the Tibetan Collection at the Institute of Oriental Studies (Leningrad Branch; since 2007 the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts). Many of them bear original monastic seals.

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- Yuille, Robert (1839).²¹ *Monggol kelen-ü üsüg-üd kiged: teden-ü qolbog-a ba: basa busu angqan kereg-tü-yi surqu durasigçi ulus-tur tusa-tai kiged: todorqai üjügülügçi: masi sayin beleg: kemegçi nom jokiyagdabai* (A book entitled 'A very good present which is useful and clarifying for those who wish to study the Mongolian letters and their ligatures as well as the most important things'). Selenginsk.

²¹ While this work appears to have been printed in 1839 according to a note in the book, it also contains a censor's endorsement in Russian dated 1837.

RÉSUMÉ

L'impression de livres tibétains en Russie au XIXe siècle et au début du XXe siècle

Le bouddhisme tibétain reçut un statut officiel en Russie par décret impérial de 1741. Les XVIIIe et XIXe siècles virent la croissance rapide du nombre des moines bouddhistes et de la construction de nouveaux monastères (*datsan*), en zone kalmouke et bouriate.

En 1831, une commission spéciale fut envoyée de St.Petersbourg, dirigée par Schilling von Canstadt, très intéressé par le bouddhisme tibétain. En Sibérie, il rencontra Kowalewski, le fondateur des études mongoles en Russie. Sa présence stimula l'activité des moines et leur intérêt pour les livres. Un dictionnaire trilingue (sanskrit, tibétain et mongol) fut gravé sur le modèle du dictionnaire pentaglotte imprimé à Beijing. Schilling von Canstadt en rapporta les planches à St.Petersbourg, où il ne fut publié qu'en 1859, par Schiefner, sous le titre *Buddhistische Triglotte*. Au début des années 1840, des caractères tibétains mobiles, en métal, furent fondus pour l'Académie des Sciences de St. Petersburg : le premier ouvrage imprimé grâce à ces caractères, qui furent utilisés jusqu'au début des années 1960, fut le *Sūtra du Sage et du Fou*.

Durant la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle, l'impression xylographique traditionnelle connut un nouvel élan dans les monastères de Sibérie orientale. Vers 1887, vingt-neuf monastères, sur un total de trente-cinq, avaient leur propre imprimerie, et avaient déjà publié environ six cents livres. Le nombre des textes tibétains publiés dépassait largement celui des textes mongols, qui étaient également des textes bouddhiques. Les moines bouriates firent cependant quelques traductions du tibétain en mongol, et les publièrent dans leurs monastères. On publia aussi beaucoup d'ouvrages bilingues et des dictionnaires (tibétain-mongol). Certains monastères diffusaient régulièrement le catalogue de leurs publications.

Cette activité suscita l'inquiétude de l'Eglise orthodoxe et de l'administration locale. En 1889, le gouverneur de la province de l'Amour interdit toute activité d'impression dans les monastères. Cette activité fut néanmoins poursuivie, en tenant compte des exigences de l'administration. On trouve dès lors souvent sur les ouvrages l'Imprimatur et le sceau du Grand Lama de Sibérie orientale. En 1911 fut publié un catalogue de 1696 publications faites dans 31 monastères, la plus longue liste connue de ces ouvrages, mais elle est cependant incomplète.

L'activité des imprimeries monastiques de Sibérie se poursuivit après la Révolution de 1917, sous le contrôle de l'administration soviétique. En 1925, le monastère Aginskiy datsan publia encore le célèbre dictionnaire tibétain-mongol de terminologie bouddhique *mKhas pa'i 'byung gnas / Merged garqu-yin oron*, mais à partir du début des années 1930, tous les monastères de Sibérie orientale furent progressivement fermés et leur imprimeries et bibliothèques détruites. Nombre de publications échappèrent heureusement à la destruction et furent transférés dans divers musées et institutions soviétiques.