

# Mongolian Traditional Game—“Shagai” Features of Mongolian Traditional Games

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The more intelligent the child plays, the brighter the nation’s future will be.

L. Tudev

In today’s interconnected global society, a crucial aspect that defines the identity of an independent country is its distinctive national heritage and values. Every country has many different cultures, and children’s games exist in every culture. Every culture has unique characteristics and norms that have been agreed upon by the members of the culture (Usman & Yusuf, 2022). Mongolians believe that the future of their nation can be discerned through the toys that children play with. These toys reflect Mongolia’s nomadic culture, rich heritage, customs, precious belongings, and unique playthings. Mongolian culture and mentality are nurtured in children through play, and an essential aspect of Mongolian games is their close association with people’s work and way of life. The Mongolian toys stand as a significant intellectual contribution of the Mongolian people to human history.

*Keywords:* traditional game, shagai, early childhood development, research on shagai

## Definition of Traditional Games

The ancestor inherits the traditional games and needs to be preserved because they contain local wisdom values, the “good”, “positive”, “worth”, and “desirable” values (Sulistyaningtyas & Fauziah, 2019).

Since the beginning of time, the play has been an essential component of childhood. Children learn about life and the world around them through it. Along these lines, humankind’s experiences are sprinkled with games (Bilal Ahmad Gul, 2023). Traditional games are part of cultural value dissemination and media for the children to grow and develop (Usman & Yusuf, 2022). Classic games are a representation of information passed down from generation to generation, and they contain a variety of roles or messages. Traditional games are cultural items with tremendous value for children in terms of fantasy, recreation, creativity, and sports, which are also a means of practicing social life, skills, courtesy, and dexterity (Muthmainah, 2022). Traditional children’s games often incorporate the knowledge, values, and cultural skills that have emerged over time from reciprocity between the particular community and the environment it provides (Sulistyaningtyas & Fauziah, 2019). Traditional children’s songs and games, as a form of indigenous knowledge systems, are facing possible extinction (Sulistyaningtyas & Fauziah, 2019).

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Mongolia boasts a rich gaming heritage and deserves to be recognized among nations that excel in this field. The Mongolian culture has a long-standing tradition of creating diverse and engaging games that are entertaining and promote mental development. These games are known for their eloquence, fun, complexity, and versatility, and Mongolians seize every opportunity to engage in playful activities. According to research conducted by Tudev (2009), there are over 800 types of traditional Mongolian games, organized into 15 different groups, showcasing the wide range and diversity of gaming culture in Mongolian (Naranchuluun, 2022).

Mongolian researchers have devoted significant attention to studying traditional games, passing their findings to future generations over the past five decades. Their research has revealed the profound effects of traditional Mongolian games on children’s development, which can be summarized as follows:

- The games are a unique form of children’s activity, imparting valuable lessons in socialization and shaping their attitudes toward the future.
- The games are a vital component of the nation’s sustainable development policy, guiding and teaching children in ways that contribute to the nation’s continued growth.
- Children’s natural talents and latent genetic abilities are awakened through play, preparing them for their future destinies and providing a foundation for engaging in various activities.
- The game serves as a form of self-training for the child’s sensory organs, including smell, taste, sight, hearing, and touch, helping them adapt to the world’s sensations, such as heat, cold, pain, joy, and sadness.
- Play is a unique school for children to learn creativity or destruction, coping skills or evasion strategies, reconciliation, and self-defense, without coercion from others or their peers.
- The game represents a significant opportunity for “self-learning”, as it provides children with their first and most memorable experiences of fun and freedom, allowing them to strengthen and enrich their innate knowledge, acquire new skills, and learn by observing and interacting with their environment (Tudev, 2009).

Overall, traditional Mongolian games play a crucial role in shaping children’s physical, mental, social, and emotional development, serving as a unique and cherished aspect of their cultural heritage.

The true worth of a country’s independence and cultural heritage can be gauged by its commitment to conducting comprehensive research and analysis of its traditional customs and traditions and elevating them to a scientifically sound and globally recognized level. One distinctive aspect of our country’s nomadic lifestyle, symbolic of nomadic farming, is utilizing raw materials, bones, and skins of five kinds of livestock in various farming activities.

### **Features of Traditional Games**

Customary games can work on different parts of kid improvement. Teachers chose traditional games as one of the appropriate ECE activities for the following reasons, according to research:

- Traditional games can be played at home with adults and in kindergarten, as children learn how to play them and want to demonstrate their independence through successful performance.
- These games, by and large, include pretending. The chance to be something other than a child—a butterfly, a doctor, etc.—is a huge motivator for children.
- Most traditional games involve movement, require teamwork, and require intellectual engagement (memorization). This separation additionally rouses youngsters to pick these games.
- These games keep kids active throughout the year (in the meadow, grass, forest, fresh air, sled driving, skating, and making a snowman). They give kids pleasure, joy, fulfillment, and a positive impact on the sun’s beams, solidness, and resistance.

- Children learn to be responsible and obligated to keep their belongings (stick, rope, bow, arrow, sled, skis, etc.) and comprehend and accept the game’s established or agreed-upon rules (Sulistyaningtyas & Fauziah, 2019).

Traditional games do not require expensive props; everyone can play them regardless of age or gender (Sulistyaningtyas & Fauziah, 2019). The classic game is a cultural activity that contains cultural values and methods to create joyful learning (Pramudyani, 2020). Mongolian traditional games exhibit distinct characteristics that make them unique and valuable. These characteristics include:

1. Enhancing intelligence and cognitive interest: Traditional Mongolian games are designed to stimulate the intellect and promote cognitive curiosity among children, fostering their mental development.

2. Encouraging learning through creativity, matching, reasoning, assembling, and disassembling: These games promote critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and creativity, providing opportunities for children to learn through active participation.

3. Creating a play environment that promotes agility, movement, ingenuity, cooperation, competition, fun, and anxiety relief: Traditional Mongolian games provide a dynamic and engaging play environment that encourages physical activity, teamwork, healthy competition, and enjoyment while offering a means of relieving stress and anxiety.

### **Mongolian Traditional Games for Early Childhood**

Play is a fundamental aspect of a child’s world, as highlighted by Usman and Yusuf (2022). It provides children with a play to freely express themselves and engage in enjoyable activities without any external pressure or coercion, as noted by Puspitasari, Rachmawati, Romadona, and Purnamasari (2021). The significance of play goes beyond mere amusement, as it plays a crucial in children’s growth and development, as Usman and Yusuf emphasized (Puspitasari et al., 2021).

The significance of traditional games, as identified by researchers, can be categorized into the following areas:

1. Cultivation of religious and moral values: Traditional games often contain elements of spiritual or moral teachings, allowing players to learn and internalize essential values and principles within their cultural or community context. This can foster a sense of moral awareness, ethical decision-making, and spiritual connection.

2. Motor development: Traditional games frequently involve physical activity, promoting the development of gross and fine motor skills, coordination, balance, and spatial awareness. Players can enhance their physical abilities and overall motor proficiency through activities such as running, jumping, throwing, or manipulating objects.

3. Cognitive development: Many traditional games require strategic thinking, problem-solving, decision-making, and critical reasoning. Players need to plan, analyze, and adapt their strategies based on the changing dynamics of the game. This can stimulate cognitive processes such as memory, attention, concentration, creativity, and logical reasoning.

4. Language development: Traditional games often involve communication and interaction among players, enhancing language development. Players may need to express themselves verbally or non-verbally, understand and interpret instructions, negotiate rules, and collaborate with others. This can foster language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

5. Social-emotional development: Traditional games provide opportunities for social interaction, cooperation, competition, self-regulation, and building relationships with their peers. Traditional games can also

promote inclusivity, diversity, and cultural appreciation, fostering social-emotional skills such as empathy, resilience, self-awareness, and interpersonal skills (Puspitasari et al., 2021; Sulistyanningtyas & Fauziah, 2019).

According to researchers, games can offer various advantages, including:

- Games incorporating role-play allow players to identify with and affirm themselves through the main character, promoting self-awareness and self-acceptance.
- Games that are dynamic require quick motor skills and intellectual responses to solve tasks, fostering physical coordination and cognitive agility.
- Games that evoke healthy humor in children create a positive mood and promote emotional well-being (Sulistyanningtyas & Fauziah, 2019).

Traditional games offer a multifaceted platform for holistic development, encompassing religious and moral values, motor skills, cognitive abilities, language skills, and social-emotional competencies. Recognizing and valuing the importance of traditional games can contribute to the enrichment and well-being of individuals and communities.

Games that must be introduced to children early can stimulate all aspects of development and are fun for children, such as traditional games (Puspitasari et al., 2021). Playing is an activity where children demonstrate their extraordinary abilities in exploring, imagining, and making decisions (Sulistyanningtyas & Fauziah, 2019).

1. Intrinsic motivation: Play for young children is driven by their internal motivation, and they engage in play voluntarily without external constraints. It is a natural and enjoyable activity that they choose to participate in. Here are some fundamental principles of the game for young children:

2. Active engagement: Play always involves and stimulates various aspects of children’s development, including physical, motor, and mental skills. It is a dynamic process that allows children to explore, experiment, and learn through their bodies and minds.

3. Imaginative and nonliteral: Children’s play is often characterized by imagination and creativity. It is a form of self-expression and personal choice. They may pretend or make-believe, creating their games and stories based on their interest and preferences, regardless of whether it reflects reality.

In essence, play for young children is a self-directed, active, and imaginative process that promotes their holistic development and allows them to freely explore and express themselves in a safe and enjoyable environment.

We also recognize the importance of traditional games with “shagai” as physical, cognitive, language, and social-emotional development.

Traditional games are very appropriate for a vehicle and media to provide educational stimulation to achieve academic goals (Puspitasari et al., 2021).

In conclusion, our ancestors have passed down various customs for educating children, including the game of “shagai”. This traditional game offers unique benefits such as cultural connection, motor skills development, cognitive engagement, and social interaction, making it a valuable and meaningful activity that carries on the legacy of our heritage.

## Research Overview

The distinctive way of life of the Mongolian people, shaped by their nomadic livestock husbandry, involves utilizing the resources of the five kinds of livestock, such as bones and skins, in various aspects of their lives.

These tangible and intangible cultural heritages hold great significance, and it is our responsibility in the present day to study and understand their meaning in alignment with the needs and demands of our contemporary society.

The “ankle” holds an essential place in the rich heritage of Mongolian culture. Evidence of its widespread use in Mongolian people’s daily life and entertainment can be seen in historical accounts, teachings passed down through generations, and research conducted by scholars. A comprehensive review of domestic and international research on ankle games has been provided.

### Research Carried out in Mongolia

In our country, the research on ankle games can be traced back to 1958, with the pioneering work of Ch. Chuluun, in his book *Games With shagai*. This seminal work describes 20 games with “shagai” that are still played today, preserving traditions that were nearly forgotten. Building upon this, G. Sukhbaatar’s research work *Dariganga Children’s Games* was published in 1962, providing detailed descriptions and playing methods for 12 games played by Dariganga children. This work also unearthed valuable information about local games such as “Altai Khumbarai” and “Silent Seven”, as noted by researcher Ts. Baasandorj in his career. These research efforts have contributed significantly to our understanding of ankle games in Mongolia, preserving and documenting this critical aspect of the country’s cultural heritage (Baasandorj, 2014).

In 1963, N. Namkhaidorj published a book titled *Board Games*, which, although not explicitly focused on games with “shagai”, included two books that featured a selection of board games played using ankles. These books provided game names, tools, and playing rules, adding to Mongolia’s growing knowledge of ankle games.

In 1987, Volume I of the *Ethnology of the Republic of Mongolia/Ethnology of Khalkha at the Turn of the 19th-20th Centuries* by D. Tangad featured an article about “Mongolian’s games and entertainment”, which highlighted nine games played among the Khalkha<sup>1</sup> people. In a 2012 reprint of this volume, two additional types of games, namely throwing four balls and shooting ankles, were included. This publication opened further opportunities to learn about the indigenous games with “shagai” of the Western regions of Mongolia, as followed by the publication of the *Ethnography of the Oirad* in 1996, which added to the growing body of knowledge about games with “shagai” in different regions of Mongolia.

These research efforts, spanning several decades and covering various regions of Mongolia, have contributed significantly to the understanding and documentation of games with “shagai” as an important cultural heritage of the country.

Furthermore, in 1999, researcher B. Nyamdorj’s work *Traditional Festivals and Games* added to the body of research on games with “shagai” by documenting 10 other games played by the people, including four games that were not previously included in the Ethnography II work, namely “Wrestling”, “Hultegjine”, “Lan orkhikh”, and “Tavan zus tavikh” (Baasandorj, 2014). This extended the scope of species research on games with “shagai”.

In 2006, L. Tudev’s work *Mongolian Games with Shagai* (2006), part of his series of works on national roots games, provided a comprehensive overview of games with “shagai” in five main directions, which encompassed:

1. The significance of ankles in Mongolian culture and the custom of honoring ankles.
2. The terminology of the sides of the ankle.
3. The utilization of ankles for divination.

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<sup>1</sup> The Khalkha the largest subgroup of Mongolian people in modern Mongolian since the 15th century (“Khalkha Mongols”, 2023).

4. The blessings and praises bestowed upon ankles.

5. The various types of games with “shagai”.

Additionally, in Tudev’s work, various types of games with “shagai”, such as Khalkha shagai, buriad shagai, Torguud shagai, Durved shagai, Oold shagai, Uzemchin shagai, Bayad shagai, Tuva shagai, and Kazakh shagai are more mentioned, with brief explanations of the rules. Furthermore, Tudev classified 145 games with “shagai” into 13 types and provided clear explanations for each type, making a valuable contribution to ankle research.

Additionally, in Tudev’s work, various types of anklets such as Khalkha ankle, Buriad ankle, Torguud ankle, Durved ankle, Oold ankle, Uzemchin ankle, Bayad ankle, Tuva ankle, and Kazakh ankle are mentioned, with brief explanations of the rules for tying them to each bone. Furthermore, Tudev classified 145 game names into 13 types and provided clear explanations for each type, making a valuable contribution to ankle research.

In another work, “Myangad Ethnic Group of Khovd Province” by D. Nansalmaa in 2010, which focuses on the ethnic history, agriculture, and traditional culture during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, games are briefly mentioned in terms of their playing methods (Nansalmaa, 2010).

B. Sarantuya’s guidebook *Mongolian Festival: Shagai* provides a comprehensive overview of games with “shagai”, with 54 types mentioned. The preface notes that games with “shagai” can be classified according to their relevance to Mongolian culture. The classification includes:

- Games with “shagai” related to livestock husbandries or herd benefits, such as horse racing, mare foaling, lambing, goat milking, cow milking, and dropping off the same sides, which are associated with the traditional Mongolian way of life and livelihood.

- This classification system provides valuable insights into the various categories of games with “shagai” in Mongolian culture and their significance. Fun with “shagai” related hunting, including shooting nine antelopes and competing by seven shots, highlights the importance of hunting in Mongolian culture. Furthermore, games with “shagai” that promote children’s development, such as those that enhance counting ability and abstract thinking, are also mentioned in the guidebook (Sarantuya, 1997).

Researcher Ts. Baasandorj has significantly contributed to studying “shagai”, mainly focusing on local games with “shagai”. He conducts comparative studies to uncover similarities and differences in games with “shagai”, including variations in names, methods, and arrangements.

This research indicates that since the 1960s, numerous individuals in the country have conducted research, collected data, and published manuals on the names and types of games with “shagai”. While acknowledging their educational significance generally, further in-depth analysis is needed to understand the educational effectiveness of games with “shagai fully”. This suggests that the research on this topic is still in its early stages and presents an opportunity for more detailed investigation and analysis (Baasandorj, 2014).

In conclusion, research on games with “shagai” in Mongolia can be traced back to as early as 1958, with the pioneering work of Ch. Chuluun, in his book *Games with Shagai*, described 20 games with “shagai” that are still played today, preserving nearly forgotten traditions. Subsequent research efforts by G. Sukhbaatar, N. Namkhaidorj, D. Tangad, B. Nyamdorj, L. Tudev, D. Nansalmaa, and B. Sarantuya have contributed significantly to our understanding of games with “shagai” in Mongolia, documenting various games, their rules, and their cultural significance.

These research efforts have helped preserve and document an essential aspect of Mongolia’s cultural heritage. The classification of ankle games based on their relevance to Mongolian culture, such as games related to livestock farming, hunting, divination, and entertainment, as mentioned in B. Sarantuya’s guidebook

*Mongolian Festival: Shagai*, has provided a comprehensive overview of games with “shagai” in Mongolia. The research has also highlighted the regional variations of games with “shagai” in different parts of Mongolia, including the Khalkah, Buriad, Torguud, Durved, Ools, Uzemchin, Bayad, Tuva, and Kazakh ankles, as described in L. Tudev’s work.

### Research Carried out in Foreign Countries

Researchers from the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Republic of China have significantly contributed to researching games with “shagai” in foreign countries. Several literature works have been published in this regard, including *Mongolian Behavior* by Dambiyajaltsan (1995), *Behavior* by Khurelsh and Saruul (2003), *Mongolian Herdsman’s Behavior* by Sampilnorov (1999), Sarangerel’s *Upper Mongolian’s Behavior* (1990), Khurelbaatar and Uranchimeg’s *Khorchin Ethnic Group’s Manner* (1988), Namjildorj’s *Ordos Ethnic Group’s Manner’s Book* (1992), Huvsai Dugarjav’s *Compendium of Culture and History of the Eastern Cape* (1988), G. Rahu’s *Cultural Customs of the Uzemchin Ethnic Group* (2004), Bekhbat’s *Reason of the Mongolian Festival* (2009), and Jagar’s *Historical Traces of Mongolian Nomadic Livestock Husbandry Culture*. These works provide valuable insights into the different types of games with “shagai”, as well as the associated variations and rules.

Researcher D. Tsagaan from Inner Mongolia has conducted comprehensive research on games with “shagai”, identifying several focus areas. These areas include:

- Notes on the games with “shagai”: This includes observations, descriptions, and documentation of the games with “shagai” and its various aspects.
- Origin and development of games with “shagai”: This entails studying the historical sources, evolution, and cultural significance of games with “shagai”.
- Species and names of ankle sides: This involves categorizing and documenting the different types of ankle toys used in the game and their terms and characteristics.
- Types and uses of ankle toys: This focuses on the various types used in the game, their materials, construction, and purposes.
- Ankle divination: This involves exploring divinatory practices associated with games with “shagai”, such as using ankle toys for fortune-telling or predicting the future.

For instance, Altan-Ochir’s *Mongolian Traditional Festival* (1988), Eu Yi Buu and Sodbilig’s *Mongolian Children’s Traditional Games* (1991), *Encyclopedia of Mongolian Rituals* (1999), Tumur and Altan’s *Mongolian Traditional Festival* (2002), and D. Tsagaan’s *Mongolian Origin Game: Game With Shagai* (2012) are some of the works that have contributed to these ideas and findings by D. Tsagaan (2012).

The *Encyclopedia of Mongolian Rituals* provides a comprehensive record of 86 different types of games with “shagai”, highlighting the rich diversity of traditions of games with “shagai” in Mongolia. N. Altan-Ochir’s book, *Traditional Mongolian Festival*, is recognized as a significant contribution to the study of modern games with “shagai” in the 20th century, shedding light on the cultural and social aspects of games with “shagai”.

In their work titled *Mongolian Children’s Traditional Games*, Eu Yi Buu and Sodbilig compiled and introduced 42 types of games with “shagai” played by Mongolian children. They noted that games with “shagai” have evolved from simple action games to more complex activities that can stimulate cognitive development in children (Tsagaan, 2012).

Furthermore, Tumur and Altan’s work *Traditional Mongolian Festival* elaborates on 53 types of games with “shagai”, providing insights into their significance, playing methods, and rules. Notably, they emphasize the

educational value of games with “shagai” in shaping the values and skills of future generations (Tsagaan, 2012).

In 2012, D. Tsagaan compiled existing research on the games with shagai, known as *Mongolian Origin Game: Game with Shagai* (2012), covering various aspects of the game (Tsagaan, 2012). One chapter focused on ankles, including how Mongolians symbolically value the ankles of wild and domesticate livestock and the reasons behind it. Tsagaan (2012) provided a detailed account of the myths, legends, and symbols associated with ankles that are prevalent in the Middle East.

Furthermore, Tsagaan (2012) conducted an extensive study on ankle divination, examining various forms such as one ankle divination, two ankle divination, and other methods, showcasing the widespread use of ankle divination in Mongolian culture and its different manifestation. The study delved into the intricate details of ankle divination practices among Mongolians, highlighting the depth and breadth of this cultural phenomenon.

In his research, Tsagaan provided a comprehensive explanation of the rules and regulations for playing 174 different types of games with “shagai”, while L. Tudev had previously documented 145 types of games with “shagai” (Tsagaan, 2012). Additionally, Eu Yi Bee and Sodbilig’s work on *Mongolian Children’s Traditional Games* briefly described games with “shagai”, presenting 42 types ranging from light to heavy or advanced games played during childhood. Interestingly, some of the games mentioned, such as “Dropping off four different sides”, “Making a campaign”, and “Playing in teams”, may not be commonly known among Mongolians.

Altan-Ochir’s book *Mongolian Traditional Festivals* (1986) not only provides information on the three types of men’s games in Mongolia but also delves into the historical origins of the ankle and describes 19 different types of games with “shagai”. In another publication called *Encyclopedia of Mongolian Traditional Rituals* by the Inner Mongolian Press Committee, 84 types of games with “shagai” are described (Tudev, 2009).

Research on games with “shagai” conducted by both foreign and domestic researchers can be categorized into three main areas:

1. Study the name, type, and characteristics of ankle games, which involves examining the different terms and types of games with “shagai” and their unique features.

2. Generalized research on the educational value of games with ankles, which involves exploring the broader educational value of games with “shagai”, which consists in examining the more comprehensive educational benefits and importance of games with “shagai”, such as their role in promoting physical, social, and cognitive development among participants.

3. Detailed study of the pedagogical impact of games with ankles involves investigating the specific pedagogical impacts of games with “shagai”, including their effects on learning, skills development, and cultural preservation.

These various research works contribute to a comprehensive understanding of games with “shagai”, shedding light on their cultural significance, educational value, and pedagogical impacts.

In conclusion, researchers from the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Republic of China have significantly contributed to studying games with “shagai” in foreign countries. Researcher D. Tsagaan from Inner Mongolia has conducted comprehensive research on games with “shagai” and has identified several areas of focus, including notes on the games, origin, and development of games, species and names of ankle toys, types and uses of ankle toys, and ankle divination. Through various literature works such as *Mongolian Behavior* by Dambyjaltsan, *Mongolian Herdsman’s Behavior* by Sampilnorov, and *Khorchin Ethnic Group’s Manner* by Khurelbaatar and Uranchimeg, valuable insights have been gained into the different types of games with “shagai”, their variations, and rules.



D. Tsagaan’s research has delved into the intricacies of ankle divination, providing detailed accounts of the myths, legends, and symbols associated with ankles in Mongolian culture, as well as the rules and regulations for playing different types of games with “shagai”. Various works such as *Encyclopedia of Mongolian Rituals* and *Traditional Mongolian Festival* have provided comprehensive records of different types of games with “shagai”, highlighting the rich diversity of traditions associated with these games. Additionally, studies on Mongolian children’s traditional games have shed light on the educational value of games with “shagai” in shaping the values and skills of future generations.

The research conducted by these Inner Mongolian researchers has not only contributed to the knowledge and understanding of games with “shagai”. Still, it has also highlighted these games’ cultural significance, historical origins, and evolution. This research provides valuable insights into the traditional games played by Mongolian children, the various types of ankle toys used in the games, and the divinatory practices associated with ankle toys. Overall, the contributions of Inner Mongolian researchers to the study of games with “shagai” have enriched our understanding of Mongolian culture and heritage and have paved the way for further research in this field.

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