

Whistling arrows and whistle arrows



...and yes there is a difference!

By Peter Dekker, April 25, 2013

It remains unclear when and where whistles found their first use on arrows, but it appears that the *Shiji* of "Records of the Grand Historian" written between 109 - 91 BC by Sima Qian is the first record mentioning them. In this text these arrows are attributed to the Xiongnu, a people whose origins themselves are somewhat mysterious. We do know that the various peoples that have inhabited present-day Manchuria -like the Khitan and Jurchen- found most use for them and came up with the widest variety of whistles for arrows on record to date. Their mastery of the whistle becomes apparent from the ingenuity and sophistication of their many different designs. Some were made for hunting various types of game, for signalling and others for ritual or sports. The height of whistling arrow sophistication occurred during the most prosperous days of the Qing dynasty; the 18th century. A tribal culture of hunters -the Manchus- had conquered a vast and sophisticated civilisation and were now in the position to have their traditional archery equipment produced by the best Chinese craftsmen of the imperial workshops in Beijing. The Manchus -now the ruling elite- ordered them to make and improve upon their traditional designs. So while the tribes on the fringes of the empire had originally innovated on archery equipment, the Chinese craftsmen in the cities now further developed and executed their designs to perfection.

Whistle arrows, whistling arrows?

There are basically two types of arrows with whistles, one with the whistle positioned behind an arrowhead and another on which the whistle is *the arrowhead itself*. Because the former are otherwise regular arrows that *also* carry a whistle I like to refer to these arrows as "whistling arrows". Arrows with only a whistle have as their sole purpose carrying the whistle so I would like to refer to these as "whistle arrows". Easy! But the distinction they made in the Qing was a little different. Let me explain below:

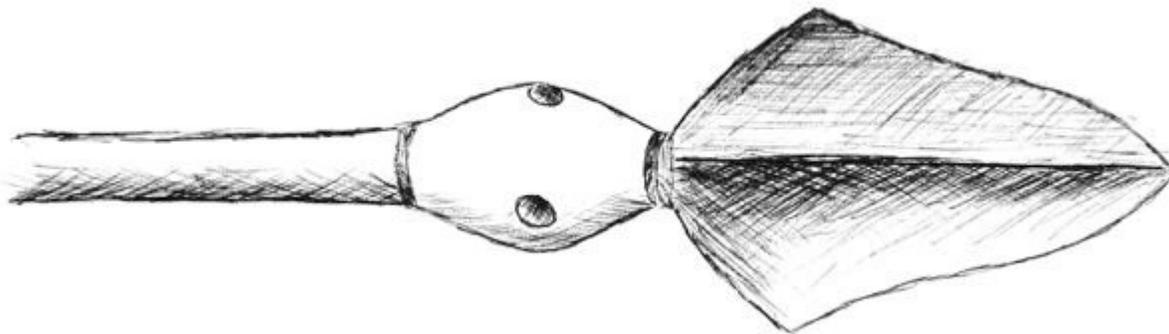
Thingies on arrows

From studying Qing official sources such as the [皇朝禮器圖式](#), a set of regulations on ceremonial regalia and military equipment published in 1766, it becomes clear that they made a somewhat

different distinction between such arrows themselves. On whistling arrows the name of the whistling chamber is *qiāo* 鞞. But rather than strictly being a whistle, *qiāo* can be any, often bulbous, "thingy" positioned behind the arrowhead that may or may not be a whistle. The same goes for whistle arrows, their whistle compartment is called *bào* 匏 but the name *bào* is used to designate any, often bulbous, "thingy" meant to be positioned at the very end of an arrowshaft. Now, Manchu arrows with whistles are generally categorized under two main groups, *shàojiàn* 哨箭 and *bàojiàn* 匏箭.

Shàojiàn 哨箭

Shàojiàn literally means "shrieking arrow". These are all whistling arrows and they have their whistling compartment, called *qiāo*, behind the arrowhead. All *qiāo* on *shàojiàn* are whistles. The whistles are usually made of bone, horn or wood and come in a variety of shapes and sizes. Most whistling arrows are used for hunting and the whistle is designed to cause a predictable reaction, such as to startle the animal between release and impact. Regulations are often very specific about which arrow to use for which animal, implying that some animals may have responded differently to certain sounds.



A Qing dynasty *shàojiàn* designed to hunt deer. Illustration by author.

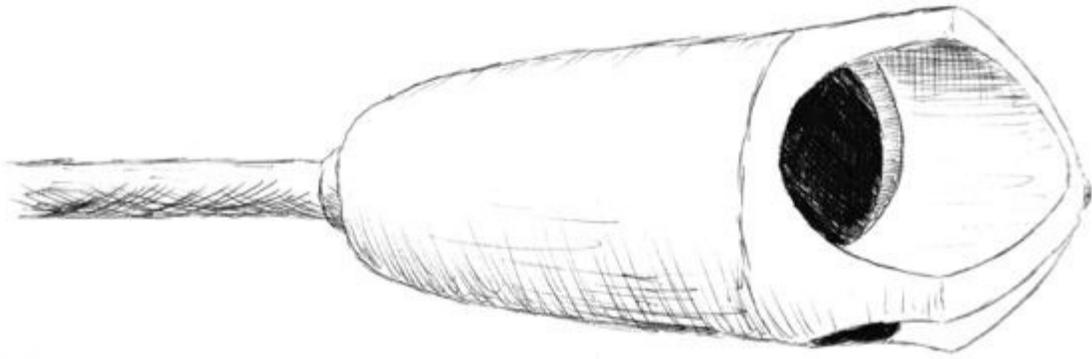




Two Qing *shàojiàn* from woodblock prints of the 1766 *Huangchao Liqi Tushi*

Bàojiàn 髀箭

The character *bào* is composed of the radicals for "bone" and "pouch", which is pretty much how many of the early *bàojiàn* used to be constructed: An arrow with instead of a tip a hollow bone compartment at the end. Later other materials might be used such as wood, horn, metal or even a dried gourd that was grown into a special mould to make it come out whistle-shaped. Although full bone *bàojiàn* were still made until the very end of the Qing, many were also constructed using a combination of several of the previous materials during this period. The shapes of *bào* vary from flattened tops, outlandish shapes resembling things like duckbills, those resembling the tips of rockets to those tapering to sharp tips. While some are relatively harmless others are clearly designed to do real damage. Their shapes are often described as having ridges or not, if yes how many, and how many holes there are. Often there are as many holes as edges. The tiger hunting whistle arrow illustrated below have four risen edges and four holes. Some ceremonial arrows have two holes between the ridges, coming to a total of eight holes and four ridges. As indicated above, while *bàojiàn* usually come with holes to make it a whistle, this is not always the case. Some *bàojiàn* are solid and would be what archers today refer to as a "blunt". *Bàojiàn* are typically used for hunting, sports, rituals and signaling.



A Qing dynasty *bàojiàn* for arousing recumbent tigers during the hunt. Illustration by author.



Two Qing *bàojiàn* from woodblock prints of the 1766 *Huangchao Liqi Tushi*

To sum up

Whistling arrows are called *shàojiàn* in Chinese, literally "screaming arrows". Their whistle compartment is called *qiāo* but solid bulging features behind the arrowheads of non-whistling arrows

can also be called *qiāo*. A *qiāo*, therefore, is not a whistle per se. All whistle arrows are *bàojiàn*, but because not all *bào* are whistles, not all *bàojiàn* are necessarily whistle arrows. Some are blunts with solid heads used for sports or hunting.

Differentiation in the Manchu language

In the Manchu language *qiāo* are *jan* and *bào* are *yoro*. But differing from the Chinese, they also use these words to designate the entire arrow. A whistling arrow is a *jan* as well, without having to add the word for arrow. A separate *bào* without any holes does go by a different name, it is called *bokita* in Manchu. But when mounted on a shaft, the whole is called *yoro* again. Now these are just basic guidelines, arrow typology in the Manchu language justifies an article on its own.



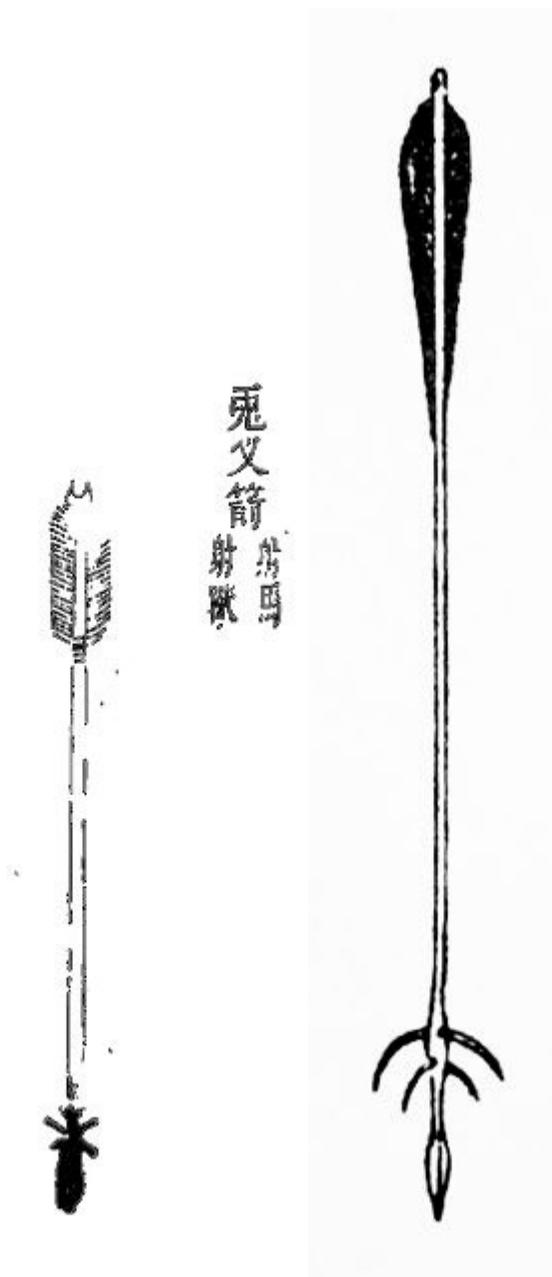
Some antique whistle arrows, whistling arrows and whistle heads.

Something I've been meaning to clear up, hare fork arrows!

One of the more peculiar types of hunting arrows found in Manchuria is a type that turns up in Qing literature and military regulations as the so-called *tùchā* 兔叉, "hare fork arrow", or *garma* in Manchu. They come in a variety of versions, some with and some without a whistle but always with prongs behind its tip. These arrows are often erroneously identified as "fire arrows", perhaps following a popular [article on whistling arrows by Liao Wanzhen](#) published on ATARN in '99. When looking at such pronged arrowheads the theory easily springs to mind. But when going through classical literature to find any confirmation for this idea, all variations of this arrow are *consistently and without exception* associated with the hunting of small game, primarily hare and fowl.

Then what about those "fire arrows"?

"Fire arrows" are mentioned in Chinese military literature but more often than not they refer to self-propelled rockets known in China from at least the 13th century onwards. Of the more than one hundred arrow types described in Qing dynasty official texts, none of them is associated with fire. Neither does the late Ming military treatise *wubeizhi* make any mention of fire arrows used by archers. But guess what: it does list a hare fork arrow, probably inspired on designs from the Manchurian regions.



Left a hare fork arrow from the late Ming *Wubeizhi* of 1628, right a hare fork from the mid Qing *Huangchao Liqi Tushi* of 1766.



Some variations on hare forks from different periods.

GLOSSARY OF CHINESE TERMS

shàojiàn (哨箭) A whistling arrow. Literally "screaming arrow", an otherwise regular arrow but with a whistling compartment behind its arrowhead.

bàojiàn (髀箭) An arrow that carries a bulging head at the end of its shaft that may or may not function as a whistle.

qiāo (髀) A thickened part behind the arrowhead of an arrow that may or may not function as a whistle. On whistling arrows this part is the whistle.

bào (髀) A thickened feature at the end of a shaft that may or may not function as a whistle. On whistle arrows this part is the whistle.

qǐ léng (起棱) Ridges

chuān (穿) Holes

tùchā (兔叉) Hare fork

tiěchǐ (鐵齒) Iron prong



Comments, questions? Break loose below: