

Starting off with Manchu archery

I often get asked questions about starting with Manchu archery, so here's an introduction.

Defining features of Manchu archery

The defining feature of this archery tradition is its focus on shooting large and comparatively heavy arrows with wooden shafts that were ideal for large game hunting or armor penetration. The bow used to shoot these projectiles is a large composite bow with string bridges and long rigid ears. Another defining feature is the use of a cylindrical thumb ring, instead of the more common teardrop shaped rings that were used in large parts of Asia and the Islamic world and even parts of Europe. These cylindrical rings could be worn all the time. Much of what passes as "Manchu archery" today leans heavily on tales of the successes of the Qing military, for marketing purposes, while at the same time failing to accurately reproduce it's defining features: Shooting large wooden arrows from a large long-eared composite bow -or a substitute with similar mechanics- with a cylindrical thumb ring.

This is the point where I would like the aspiring Manchu archer to stop and think about what he or she is getting himself into, because literally everything is more difficult for Manchu archers! Let me explain below.

- - - EQUIPMENT - - -

The bow

True Manchu bows have very long ears with a forward bend, from 26 to 33 cm from knee to ear and 18-23 cm from nock to inside of the string bridge. The length and alignment of these ears makes these bows very vulnerable for twisting and lateral bending. They require well-cured wood for the ears and a high level of precision from the maker to make a good, straight bow that doesn't tend to unstring itself when pulled.

Once finished, Manchu bows are vulnerable for damage from improper stringing, storage or use, like twisting the handle during the pull. Because most people tend to blame the bowyer when their bow breaks, few makers like to make proper Manchu bows with long ears.

Some makers instead produce bows with rather short ears, which are still sold as "Manchu" but are much closer to Mongolian or Tibetan traditional bows in use. With their lower stored energy, these bows are not well suited for shooting the typically large Manchu arrow. Others overbuild the ears in order to make them withstand more abuse while the added weight lowers the overall efficiency of the design.

The arrows

Manchu arrows are large. Antique examples in my collection have wooden shafts that range from 82 to 100 cm (or 32.5 to 39.5 inch) measured from the inside of the nock to the base of the arrowhead. Such shafts are uncommon in the world of traditional archery and therefore hard to come by. Because spining and weight matching shafts relies on having enough of them to group them, no supplier I know of offers them spined and / or weighted. Weighted? Yes, antique Manchu arrows from the same set are remarkably close to each other in weight, and somewhat less so in spine. They are typically fletched with long feathers (25 - 37cm long) that are again harder to get, and harder to put on the shaft. (No standard fletching jig can handle such sizes!) A shortcut is to make each fletching out of two feathers placed behind each other. Due to their size, Manchu arrows also need rather heavy arrowheads to balance them. Most Manchu shafts are balanced at 36-42% of their total length, measured from the tip. Points of 200 grains or more are often required, again hard to come by and often quite a bit more expensive than your average target point. The good part: Due to their size, Manchu arrows hardly ever break and you're less likely to lose them. Your set will last so much longer than most traditional sets of arrows, so in the long run it will be cost effective.

The thumb ring

Manchu thumb rings are cylindrical and worn over the knuckle of the thumb. A tight fit is very important, as is a non-slippery inside. The rings I use are all antique, I bought them on various antique markets during my 1,5 year stay in China. Today, some shops offer them or one can shop around the many fakes that are offered on ebay. Most jade and stone rings are not recommended for beginners. Deer antler was the main traditional material, even among upper Manchu classes, when it came to real shooting, and it still works best today. At least three methods were described to use these, which mainly differ in the placement of the index finger. Manchu rings are a challenging type of thumb ring to learn to use, especially with heavier bows, but the reward is that it can result in very clean releases. Also see my [thumb ring tutorial](#).

Or check out our friend's Caesar Ziyu Zhang's youtube tutorial:

How to use Manchu Thumb Ring for Archery/怎样使用清朝筒型扳指射...



The string

Manchu strings are typically very thick, for large part in order to make them stiffer for a better cast. Due to the bow's high energy storage, the added weight of this thicker string is not much of an issue. Added advantages are that thicker strings are much more comfortable to use with the Manchu thumb ring, and thicker strings are less likely to split an arrow at the nock, which is why even for heavy war arrows there was usually no separate insert in the nock.

For the persevering ones

So, Manchu archery requires getting a special long-eared bow that is not easy to come by, sourcing of large, expensive arrows or parts to make them yourself, and a thumb ring that is both not easy to come by, nor easy to use. If this rather encourages than discourages you, welcome to the club! I'll follow with some places I get my equipment.

--- WHERE TO GET ---

Horn bows

I get a lot of questions about where to get a Manchu horn bow, like mine. I'm sad to say that they are not available for purchase.

My bows are made by [Huang Wen Chieh](#), who is a fine craftsman that makes bows from time to time for his own pleasure. When he is not making bows he is reproducing all kinds of antique arms related items, collecting, or stuffing animals from foxes to, quite recently, a horse. He is in it for the love of craftsmanship, and does not aspire to become a commercial bow maker. At this moment, there is no commercial bowyer I know of that takes orders for fully traditional Manchu composite bows.

Glass fiber bows

For fiberglass replicas, Justin Ma and myself recently started www.manchubows.com where we sell an affordable Manchu bow replica from 35 to 55 pounds at 36". The bow's profile, and flat force draw curve is the closest we've seen to antiques so far.

Another good choice is [Mariner's Qing dragon 2](#) available at Justin Ma's Cinnabar Bow. This bow does not intend to mimic the look of original Manchu bows, but rather is a modern take on the Manchu design that projects its mechanics to a contemporary fiberglass and bamboo laminate design. Available from about 30 - 70 pounds at 36".

Magén Klomp of Fairbow Nederland is the only one I know to make [custom Manchu bows in the higher poundages](#). He can make bows with lots of custom options anywhere from 15 to 120 pounds measured at the western standard of 28". They can easily drawn to 32", but for longer draws he can take that into account with the tiller as well. Magén also sells some of the best reproductions of Manchu arrowheads around, and can usually get you the shafts you need.

Arrows

I've bought arrow shafts for DIY from Hilary Greenland of [Sylvan Archery](#).

My current set of arrows is made by Magén Klomp of [Fairbow](#).

I'll keep looking for good sources of shafts and other arrow-making materials, also for my own use, and I'll update the site accordingly.

Miscellaneous

Other than bows and arrows, Fairbow usually has quite a selection of [Manchu archery related items](#) ranging from unfinished bows for DIY, tanged arrowheads, complete arrows, etc.

- - - HOW TO LEARN - - -

Manchu archery is best learnt by doing. I figured it out by translating old manuals, looking at all the [period photographs](#) I could gather, and by learning from archers of related Asian traditions such as Japanese, Korean, Mongolian, Tibetan, and Ottoman style archers. I also learned a fair bit from English archers, especially those familiar with the heavy warbow and / or instinctive archery. The best part so far was meeting Ku Ku, the last living Manchu archer, in Singapore in early 2012. She was able to explain to me some of the details of the bow hand and thumb ring release that I didn't find elsewhere.

Don't get tempted to apply too much of modern olympic archery in your style. This system is not designed for the use of heavier bows, nor is it designed for instinctive aiming, both hallmarks of Manchu archery. I also have a [series of photographs of my style](#) as it was two years ago on the site. I've changed the technique a little since then, I'll work on an update.

I sometimes teach at archery get-togethers. I don't teach for money, it usually costs me quite a bit to get to locations, so key for me is to have fun with some good people with shared interests. I go to the U.S.A. at least once a year for the [Chinese Archery Program](#), and I attend the annual St. George Shoot organized by the [S.P.T.A.](#) Other than that I usually attend a few more archery festivals to keep up with my network or archer friends and meet new people. I'm willing to travel around to help people started, time permitting, against reimbursement of my cost of travel.

- - - YES, I TEST - - -

If anyone else makes proper Manchu archery equipment I happily test them for feedback and possible inclusion on this page.

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