

Interview with the last Manchu archer

By Peter Dekker, January 23, 2015

Introduction

Welcome to part 2 of the story of the last Manchu archer. In [part 1](#) we went in-depth on Ku Ku's background. This article is about the actual encounter with Ku Ku and the interview.

The interview

We met on a hot and sunny day in Singapore. I was very excited to finally meet a living Manchu archer and couldn't wait to see her. When we entered her former practice in Singapore, Ku Ku received us with a broad smile. She was an energetic old woman that stood straight and proud on her two feet. After a formal exchange of gifts, she proudly told us about her father Tong Zhongyi and showed us some pictures hanging on the wall.



Ku Ku's father, Tong Zhongyi, teaching a little boy.

Then she asked, in Chinese: “So what do you want to know about archery?” The first thing that caught our eye was the photograph of her shooting that eventually lead to our meeting, so we asked about the background of this photograph.



Ku Ku: In this picture I had just won gold in this tournament in in 1957. It was the last tournament of its kind. I used to be an archery instructor but after this tournament everybody switched to the Western style and after some years I quit because of lack of interest. I also stopped shooting, as I saw no point anymore.

Do you still keep some of your old equipment?

Ku Ku: Yes I still have one of my bows and some thumb rings. All are in China, I did not take anything to Singapore.

Where was your bow made?

Ku Ku: My equipment was made in Beijing. At the time there was still an old bowyer, he was very good. My father was very knowledgeable about bows and could tell a good bow from a bad bow at first glance. He was the one that picked my equipment for me. I also had heavier bows for longer distances. In our time already you could see a decline in bow making skills, the older bows were much better made than the newer ones. In my time there were two types of bows, a longer bow for shooting on foot and a shorter bow used from horseback.

Do you know the name of the shop, was it Ju Yuan Hao? Did you ever hear of Changxing in Chengdu?

Ku Ku: I do not know what the shop's name was, only that it was in Beijing. I was not aware about shop in Chengdu.

What draw weights did you shoot?

Ku Ku: *My bows were about 2,5 to 4 li. (Approx 33 – 53 pounds) There were heavier bows, but we only used them for strength training. My father pulled 7,5 li bows. (Approx 100 pounds). I used my light bow for short distances and the heaviest one only for the longer distances.*

Were there any other exercises you did to help archer?

Ku Ku: *Yes, many. For archery you need to train the arm and back muscles so we did lots of pushups en press-ups. We also trained the triceps and biceps with weights. In order to balance the body and straighten the spine, we complemented the pushups with sit-ups. Always practice both sides of the body equally!*

I have read about exercises where the arms rested on supports. Did you do anything like that?

Ku Ku: *Yes we used wooden stands for that. Made of hardwood with a moon shaped top where the arm could rest in, the bottom was in the shape of a cross. It worked as follows: The stands served as indicators for the right height in the full draw position so both arms would be perfectly in line. They would be positioned right under the upper arms, before the elbow, and we would take full draw position and stayed in that posture. This was done without bow, and at the end of the period we went through the motion of release. It is important to note that we only used them as indicators for the right height of the arms, we were not supposed to lean. My dad would make me stand in this position for extended periods of time, even walking away without telling me when he would come back. He would sneak up on me and suddenly kick one of the stands from under my arm. If I dropped that arm, it meant I leaned to much and I had to start over from the beginning. These are tough exercises, build them up slowly and stretch your arms afterwards.*

How long have you been training?

Ku Ku: *Ever since I was little. My father trained me in martial arts from age five, archery from age six. I kept doing most of the exercises up to about age 70, then I started to slow down. You can still see that I am walking straight! (That was in fact one of the first things we noticed! This is due to my lifelong commitment to training.*

What was your training regimen like?

Ku Ku: *I practiced shooting once or twice a day. We did weight training 2-4 hours a week, including half an hour of rope stretching training.*

(This rope-stretching training is described in Tong Zhongyi's book "Chinese Wrestling".)

How did you end up in Singapore?

Ku Ku: *At the time it was dangerous to be a Manchu and I was among the first people who were sent to Mao's working camps. It was tough. As soon as I saw an opportunity, I fled to Singapore. That was about 30 years ago. Now, when I go back I am well received again. The government re-instated our family's name, partly due to what my father had meant for martial arts.*

Did he teach you the complete system?

Ku Ku: *No, not everything. I was mainly trained in Da Liu He, wrestling, and target archery. My father was also a good horseback archer, pellet bow archer, and puller of heavy bows but he did not pass those skills to me. My father could shoot a coin out of the sky from horseback with his bow. He*

also shot the “ground ball” from horseback and had many different postures on the horse to shoot it when it was in front of him, or behind, or right under the horse. There was no place anymore for those things in the modernizing China I grew up in so these skills stopped being passed down.

What distances did you shoot and on what targets?

Ku Ku: We shot at 24, 32 and 64 meters. We shot the Western style targets everyone uses today.

Technical exchange

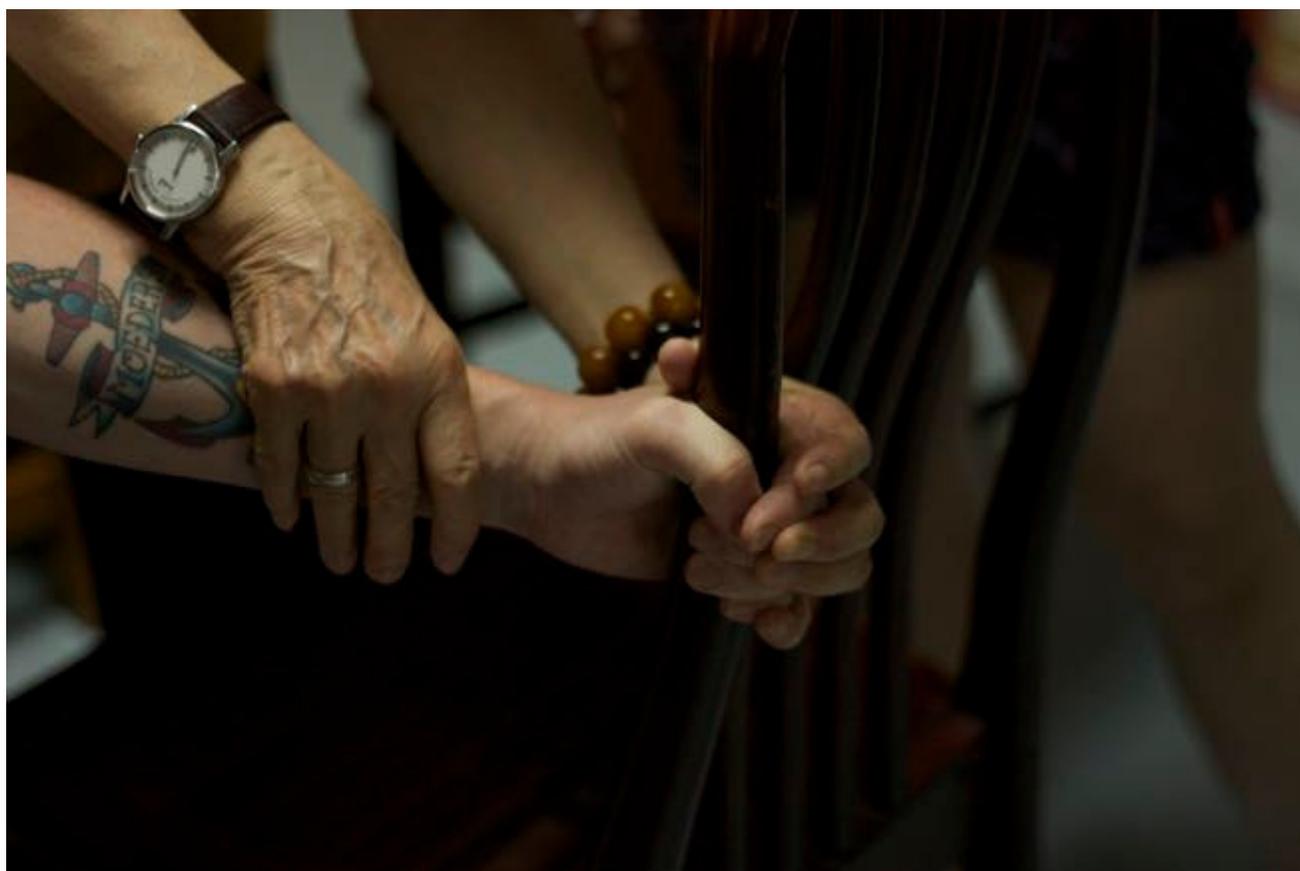
After the interview she offered to look at my style. She went through the movements of drawing and release and despite the fact she did not have a bow in her hands her stance and the movements were smooth and solid, it was clear that her style was deeply engrained in her body. I could also see her style was already influenced by Western target archery, namely the style of Horace Ford: The anchor point was near the mouth, with a relatively short draw. Her feet were also parallel, not the open stance that is advocated in the old manuals. When I showed her pictures of old Manchu archers she said they all drew much longer than she had done. It was clear that her style had already begun to shift towards a specialized target archery style, much like how the Mongols today are also mixing concepts of modern Western target archery. Nevertheless, she had the characteristic Manchu upper body posture, leaning into the shot, and her bow and draw hands were exactly like in the texts and photographs we've been studying so long.





I asked her to look at my draw hand and bow hand and give her opinion. I was pleased to hear she agreed with my thumb ring technique. She added that there were several prevalent techniques and mine was one of them. She preferred a technique where the tip of her index finger rested on the tip of her thumb. She had more to add to my bow hand, adjusting here and there until it was perfect in her eyes. Lastly, she showed us a technique where you hang the bow over the bow hand shoulder and quickly put it into action by grabbing the handle. This was very interesting, as we've seen Manchus in paintings wearing the bows like this but we were not aware of any special techniques to deploy the bow swiftly and efficiently in this manner.

After the talk she asked where I learned Manchu archery. We explained that before meeting Ku Ku we had no living teacher and that we've mainly tried to do it from texts, photographs, and study of related cultures. You could see that this meant something to her, and she said: "There is hope".



Conclusion

I left satisfied and in awe. What a vital, energetic and proud woman she was, and from what an amazing pedigree. Our encounter was an unexpected twist in a long search for first-hand information on Manchu archery. It was also the beginning of a new challenge, to make them proud, on their terms. After our encounter I immediately put all her words to practice and many little pieces really fell together since then. It was one of the turning points in my search to rediscover and reconstruct Manchu archery. Unfortunately, Ku Ku's health took a turn for the worse and she moved back to Shanghai after which we lost contact. Last thing we heard was she was in frail health and people did not want to bother her anymore. We are grateful for the time we have been able to spend with her.





Also see part 1



[Last Manchu Archer 1](#)