

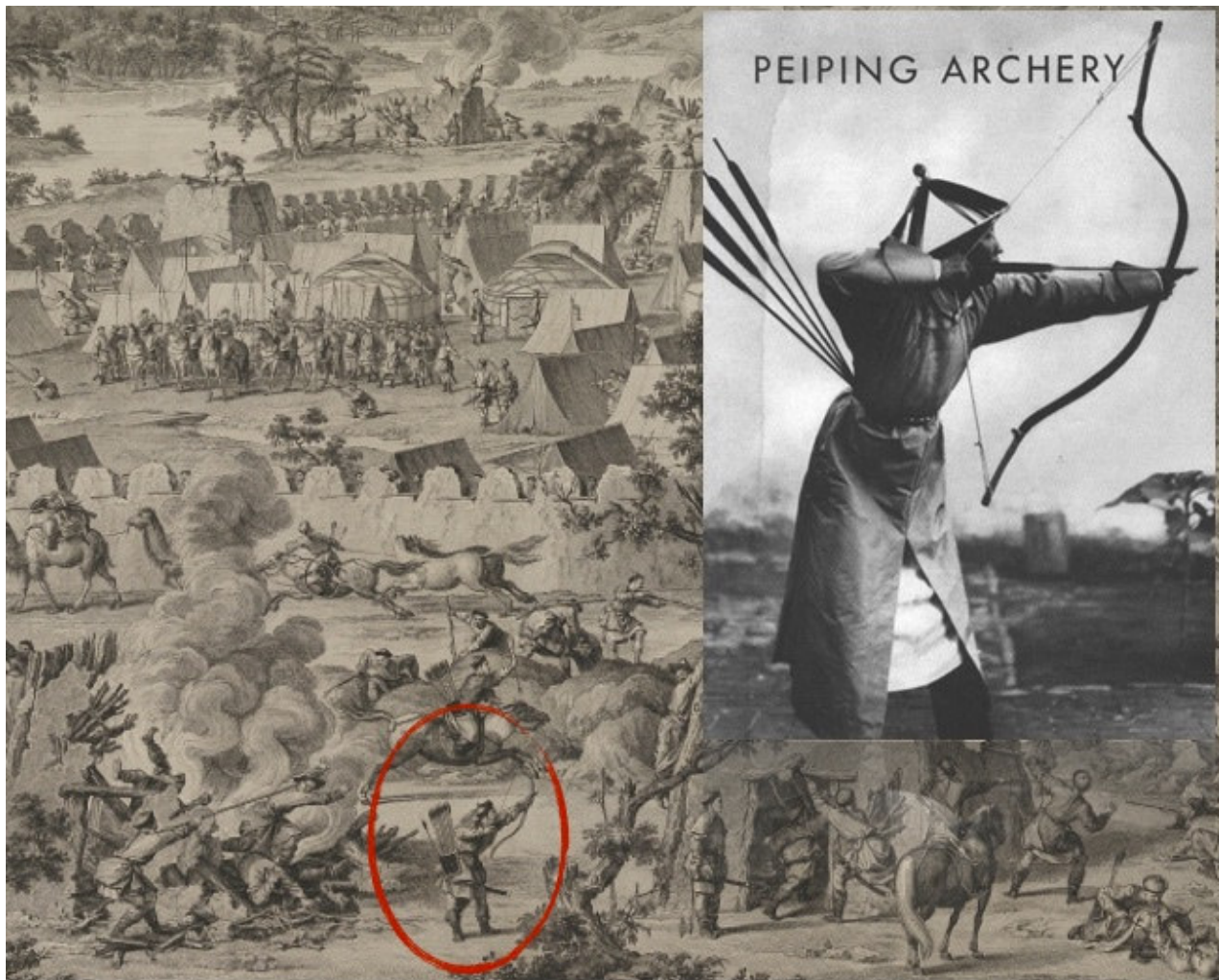
Technique



By Peter Dekker, August 12, 2012.

In order to learn or reconstruct a style of archery of any culture, it is important to identify and choose a certain style or school. The Manchus ruled the Qing dynasty but that does not mean that all archery practiced in China during this period was Manchu archery. Also, Manchu archers among themselves had several different schools of archery. In my article [A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO MANCHU MILITARY ARCHERY](#) in the [Journal of Chinese Martial Studies](#)¹ I describe at length how I got to the current reconstruction of Manchu archery. I intend to publish more about this subject in the future. For now, a short summary will do:

When looking at Manchu archers from various periods one can't help to notice that there is a large group of military archers that all use exactly the same posture. One of the earliest depictions of this style is an archery manual dated 1722, by an author named Liu Qi.² It is a book aimed at military examination candidates, he uses the archery method of the imperial guardsmen of the Kangxi emperor as an example of best archery practice. The style is characterized by a leaning posture, and it describes two follow throughs: One with the hand staying in place and the other with the hand swinging backwards in a controlled manner. An excellent example of the classic Manchu style, are three pictures by a certain [H.R. Kress on this page](#). That this very characteristic style does not stand alone is exemplified not only by its presence in the drawings accompanying Liu Qi's manual, but also by various pieces of artwork and photographs.



It is clear that the figure on the above copperplate print of the battle of Tonguzluq is the exact same style as we see depicted in the Kress photographs. This plate was made as a series of plates in France in 1773, it was based on a detailed drawing by Jesuit court painter Giuseppe Castiglione, who worked in the imperial palace was very close to the Qianlong emperor and his guards. Castiglione was not present at this particular battle, but he was very familiar with the archery practices of the emperor and his imperial guardsmen.

Imperial guard, 1722*Ku Ku, 1957*

To the left a drawing from Liu Qi's 1722 manual. To the left is is Ku Ku in 1957. Ku Ku is probably the very last living Manchu archer who received formal training in this style. We interviewed Ku Ku, who is alive and in good health, in Singapore in January 2012. This interview was published in the Journal of Chinese Martial Studies.³

The imperial guard

The vigilant reader may have noticed that there is a strong connection with this style and the imperial guard. And indeed, Liu Qi describes the imperial guard in 1722, Castiglione probably drew and painted archers based on those he knew: the emperor and his guards. Ku Ku's father was an imperial guard to the last emperor, Pu Yi, confirming that the style endured in these circles at least up to Pu Yi's time. Imperial guards were generally hand picked by the emperors and typically represented the best of the best of Manchu warriors. It is to be expected that the most practical and purest form of Manchu archery is strongly connected to this prominent group of archers. Many Qing manuals show a great extent of Chinese influence, which doesn't make them any less interesting, but for the purpose of isolating Manchu archery for a thorough in-depth study of this particular style we should choose our sources carefully.

THE SEQUENCE

Here is a series of photographs of myself going through the sequence of the Manchu archery technique. For a description on the details of the Manchu thumb draw technique, please see my online article [USING THE MANCHU THUMB RING](#). During the entire sequence, the eyes should be fixed on the target.



Feet are shoulder width apart. This is the stance referred to in modern archery as the open or oblique stance, known to be the choice of expert archers but more difficult to reproduce than the standard square stances. With this stance the upper body is at about 45 degree angles with the line to the target, the rear foot is at 90 degree angle with the target line, and the front foot is at about 45 degree from the rear foot. Heel of the rear foot is in line with the toes of the front foot. This stance is known in Chinese as 不八不丁, or "Not like the character 八 (8), not like the character 丁 (nail)". While the general foot setup and body-to-target alignment is the same, we can notice some variation in stance from Manchu archer to Manchu archer, just as we see among expert archers on today's shooting lines. Gaze at the target, specifically at the exact spot you want to hit and zoom into its smallest detail. Breathe deep and slow, from the abdomen.



Grasp the arrow behind the tip and bring it towards the bow.



Grasp it with the thumb and index finger of the bow hand and move your draw hand back along the arrow, stroking the feathers. (Exactly, this is not me. But who better to demonstrate it than an actual Manchu archer!)



Align the nock with the angle of the string. In a fast-shooting setup you will already have the nocks neatly aligned in your quiver or through the belt, saving some time in this stage.



Push the arrow forward in order to nock it. This is the stage where the temptation to look at the nock will be the greatest. Resist it! When the arrow is nocked pull it back a little and hold the shaft with the thumb and index finger of the bow hand in order to keep the arrow in place.



Hook the thumb ring behind the string and twist the hand inward to secure the string.



Bring the bow up in preparation to pull it.



Before pulling, make sure you release the shaft with the bow-hand thumb and index finger, if not one will pull the string out of the nock, a common beginner's mistake. Open the bow using the back muscles as early in the draw as possible by pulling close to one's body, putting the bow arm elbow backwards as far as one can to bring the force to the back, rolling the shoulder back into the draw. Imagine opening heavy sliding doors and forcing one's body in-between, using force of both arms to pull them apart. Leaning into the bow also helps getting the back muscles in the shot. The proper execution of this technique will be extremely important when using heavy bows.⁴



Full draw. I pull about 34" here with a 60# [Mariner bow](#). Many archers wonder about the absence of an anchor point in this style of archery. In fact, there are many, just not the way we are used to seeing them. First, the string runs over the chest, adding stability to the pose. In the oblique stance, the string moves away from the chest so touching does not interfere at all with the shot. Second, the feathers touch the cheek. Third, the draw is so long that there can be little variation on how to hold a bow with that draw length. Fourth, the finger of the bow hand can feel the arrowhead, so one can exactly determine his draw length. Depending on the type of arrow shot, the arrow is pulled to the beginning of the bark wrapping near the tip, to a "feeler", or to the base of the arrowhead.



Releasing with the Manchu thumb ring means twisting the wrist clockwise (counter-clockwise for lefties) while opening the hand. This is the trigger that releases the arrow. Texts then describe two ways of follow through that are technically unrelated to the shot, but may contribute to a good shooting form through adding the concentration during release. I will describe the follow-through taught to me by Ku Ku, the last Manchu archer.



After the releasing twist the draw arm moves backwards in a controlled manner.



The draw hand is completely relaxed.



And ends with the palm backwards. A variation of the technique is shown in the Kress photographs, where the palm faces up after release. Either way can result in consistency just be sure to pick one and stick to that one alone.



Full draw seen from behind me, showing the oblique / leaning stance. Yes, I'm shooting left-handed here, which is my natural side.

¹Journal Of Chinese Martial Studies, winter 2012. Issue 6. Three-In-One Press, Hong Kong. 2012.

²A portion of the manual, with illustrations, is published in: Stephen Selby, Chinese Archery, Hong Kong University Press, pp. 361.

³The entire interview was published in the Journal Of Chinese Martial Studies, winter 2012. Issue 6. Three-In-One Press, Hong Kong. 2012.

⁴It is hard to learn from only looking at these pictures and caution is advised, it is easy to get injured pulling heavy bows. In my enthusiasm I learned the hard way where the weak points are, but also how to prevent and fix such problems so others can hopefully skip that painful stage in the learning process.