

Rise of the Manchus

"Their faces are comely, and commonly broad as those of Chinese people; their colour is white, but their nose is not so flat nor their eyes so little as the Chinese have. They speak little, and ride pensively. In the rest of their manners they resemble our Tartars of Europe, though they may be nothing so barbarous. They rejoice to see strangers; they are in no way like the grimness and sourness of the Chinese gravity, and therefore in their first abords they appear more human."

This is how Jesuit missionary father Martino Martini, described the Manchus after he first encountered them during their wars against the Chinese Ming dynasty in the early 17th century. Apparently, father Martino Martini could relate more to these free-spirited warrior people than he could to the strictly confucianist and isolated "Middle Kingdom" mindset of the Chinese literati he had been dealing with.



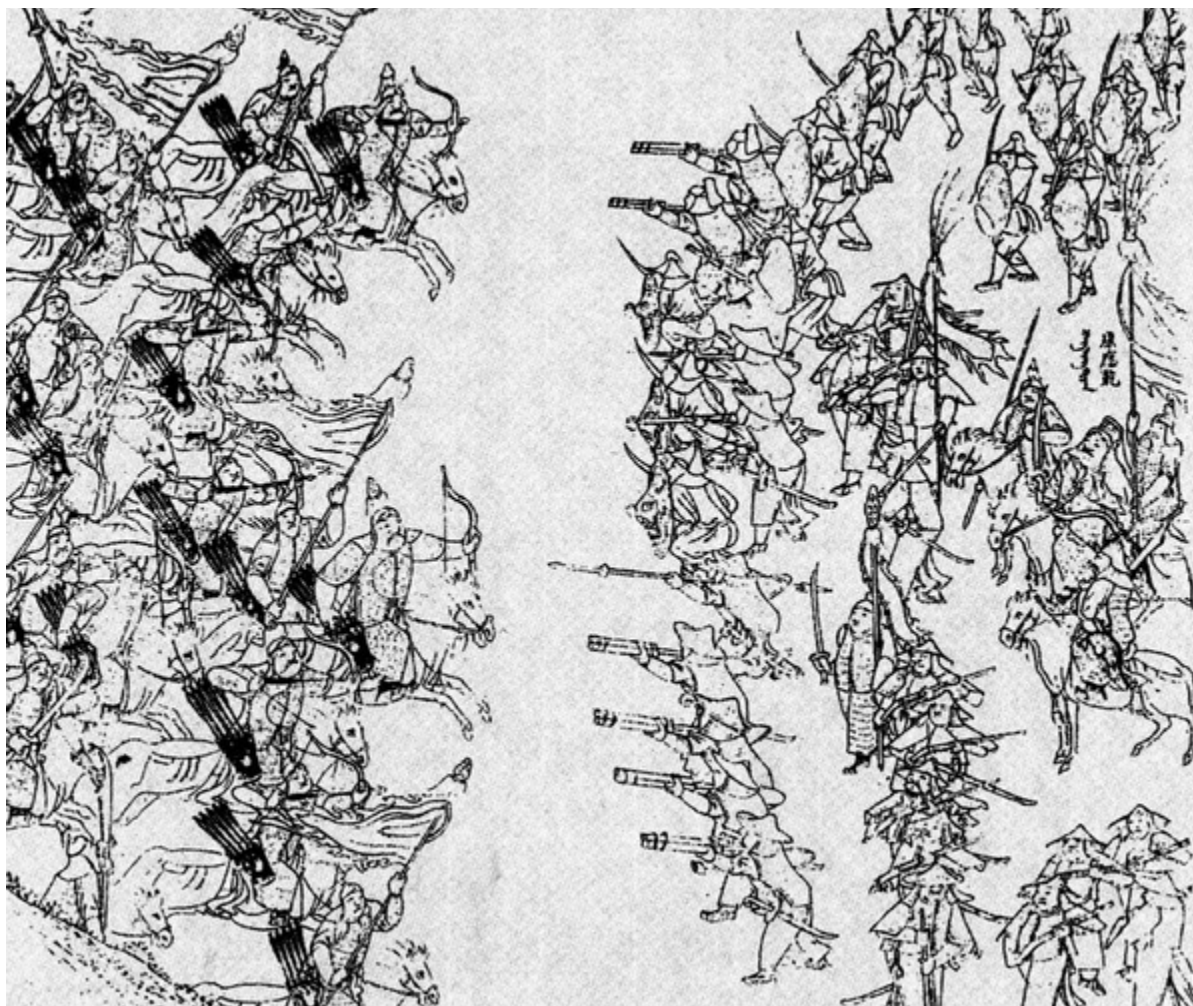
A well decorated Manchu hunting with the emperor in the 18th century
Detail from a larger painting in the Palace Museum collection by Jesuit missionary Giuseppe Castiglione

Manchu was the name that a number of united Jurchen tribes took in the 17th century in present day Manchuria. Manchu being an identity rather than a race, the Manchu cultural group contained mostly Jurchen but also Koreans, Ming Chinese deserters and frontiersmen, Mongolians and others. The Jurchen were originally a shamanic warrior people that lived mostly off hunting and fishing. They gained considerable wealth through the trade in furs and other animal derivatives as well as products such as ginseng to Russia, China and Korea. It is remarkable that even though they did settle themselves, they did not develop much agriculture until as late as the 16th century. Their main tool for both hunting and fishing was their composite bow. The Jurchen tribes lived in small communities that worked together as hunting parties. Local landlords, the *Beile*, led the hunts and

controlled the villages and often also had control of the local arrow production. As was the case with the different Mongol tribes, Jurchen tribes were known to opportunistic and frequently raided and fought with other Jurchen settlements.

The story of the Manchus started in present-day Manchuria with a man named Nurhaci, a Jurchen of the Gioro clan. After his father and grandfather were killed after allegedly being lured into a trap by a Ming loyalist Jurchen chieftain, Nurhaci started to unite the various Jianzhou Jurchen tribes and managed to decapitate the betrayer of his father and grandfather. Nurhaci became a great concern of the Ming who Ming actively supported the Yehe tribe, one of the few Jurchen tribes not yet united behind Nurhaci's cause. In 1618 Nurhaci proclaimed a list of Seven Grievances against the Ming, mainly about their support to the Yehe, an effective declaration of war.

In response the Ming sent a large punitive expedition with a mission to besiege Nurhaci's hometown. The force consisted of Korean, Yehe and Ming troops. The Ming force alone was estimated to consist of around 160.000 men while Nurhaci had 60.000 warriors to his disposal. A brilliant strategist, Nurhaci managed to destroy the much larger Ming force in a series of well-planned attacks at Sarhu in 1619. This was the first of a series of victories where an army of mainly Manchu mounted archers defeated a force that was for a large part equipped with muskets and cannon. Nurhaci kept pressing on, taking the Ming provincial capital Shenyang in 1621, renaming it Mukden. He continued to enlarge his territory in many successful battles with Korean, Mongolian, Chinese and Jurchen troops. He also ordered the formation of a written language based on the Mongolian script, which later became to be known as the Manchu language. In 1626 Nurhaci was hit by a Portuguese cannon in an attempt to siege Ningyuan, he died on September 30th, 1626.



The battle of Sarhu in 1619. Left: Mounted Jurchen archers with Nurhaci on the lead. Right: Ming infantry with primitive firearms, swords, shields, mounted archers and mounted lancers.

From a woodblock print in the Manchu [Veritable Records](#).

Nurhaci's smart and ambitious son Hung Taiji took over, who founded the base of what was to become the Qing dynasty. In 1636 he abolished the term Jurchen and instead put all Mongols, Koreans, Jurchen and Chinese under his rule under the common Manchu identity. In the same year he declared himself emperor of the newly founded Qing dynasty. (Formerly "latter Jin") Hung Taiji died of an illness at age 60 in 1643. His son Fulin took over and was installed as the Sunzhi emperor. In reality, it was his older son Dorgon that was in charge as a regent for the time being.

Apart from the Manchu threat, the Ming had problems of their own. In 1644 a rebel force lead by Li Zicheng attacked Beijing and the last Ming emperor hung himself on a tree behind the Forbidden City. Wu Sangui, a distinguished Ming general, was in charge of Shanhai Pass, a critical pass into Manchu territory with Dorgon on the other side. When Wu Sangui heard of the sack of Beijing, he opened the gates for the Manchus in order to free Beijing together. Reasons for this twist of fate may have been that Wu Sangui's father and favourite concubine were held hostage in Beijing. He

may have also rather rules with a known but disciplined enemy, than have China taken over by an unknown, rather undisciplined band of low educated rebels. In any case, the Manchus took the empty throne in Beijing in 1644 and put important military bases throughout the empire in the following years.

The Manchu Qing dynasty did only conquer all of Ming China, it even expanded China's borders to unprecedented vastness in a series of campaigns launched by the Qianlong emperor. These campaigns were a response at unrest and instability on the fringes of the empire, most battles were won and new lands incorporated into the Qing realm. Ultimately the Qing dynasty governed over 36% of the world's population and was the largest empire that has ever existed by this criterium. It is notable that their characteristic composite bow remained one of the main weapons in the Manchu army throughout this expansive period, being effectively used to deal with armies who already relied much more on firearms.

The Eight Banners

Nurhaci divided all his troops under a number of banners, which served as administrative and military divisions of his troops. All banner households were to provide a certain number of trained warriors and horses. Eventually, all Manchus fell under one of eight banners with different colors or color combinations and separate Mongol and Chinese banners were also set up. During almost the entire duration of the Qing dynasty, all bannermen were garrisoned in walled cities inside Chinese cities or at strategic points all over the empire, and in the capital's inner city, guarding the Imperial Palace. The Manchus and their close allies remained a warrior elite that were government sponsored, and enjoyed privileges like exemption from torture. In contrast to the traditional view that Manchus slowly assimilated into Chinese culture, new research points out that a large number remained in these walled cities, strictly separate from the Chinese population, almost until the very end of the dynasty.

by Peter Dekker

Recommended further reading:

Elliott, Mark C. - The Manchu Way
Struve, Lynn A. - Voices from the Ming-Qing cataclysm
Crossley, Pamela Kyle - Orphan Warriors
Crossley, Pamela Kyle - The Manchus
Giles, Herbert A - China and the Manchus

Interesting link:

[Harvard Manchu Chronicles Translation Project](#)