

Photographs of Mongolian archers

By Peter Dekker, August 16, 2013

The Mongolian bow as we know it today is a fairly recent invention. At one of the archery festivals in South-Korea one of the elder Mongolian archers told me that in her village they only changed to the current style in the 1980's. The transition might have started somewhat earlier but we are quite sure it happened in the 20th century and no earlier. The conquest era Mongolian bow was a different beast entirely with long, rigid, backswept ears. Under the Qing dynasty, Mongolian archers are almost always depicted with Manchu style bows and arrows. This, to me, effectively rules out the persistent myth that the Qing would have prohibited archery among the Mongolians. It makes no sense at all because those Mongolian men under Qing control were considered allies and were enlisted in privileged positions over Chinese in the Qing army. And those Mongolian tribes outside the Qing's sphere of control, well, they wouldn't have any control over them to prohibit anything now would they? Not surprisingly, no-one has so far been able to point out any record or reference to such a ban in Qing official texts or any old text for that matter.

Neither the Mongolians allied to the Qing ([Khalkha](#), [Buryat](#), [Torghut](#)) nor those that opposed the Qing ([Dzungar](#) / [Oirat](#)) held on to the conquest era style bow, and most Mongol opposition against the Qing is described as been carried out with firearms on the Mongol side.¹ This suggests that it was the Qing that made them switch *back* to bows in a time when use of firearms was already widespread practice among Mongolian soldiers. When the Qing fell, they converted the Manchu bow they were now so accustomed to into a sports bow by shortening the ears. Shorter ears make sense if you don't need to shoot heavy war arrows anymore: they are effective already at lighter draw-weights and work better with lighter arrows, shooting them faster. Below some photographs, many of them showing Mongolian archers with Manchu style bows, before the transition to the modern day, shorter-eared Mongolian bow.

¹Perdue, Peter C.: CHINA MARCHES WEST, the Qing conquest of central Eurasia. Harvard University Press, 2005.





1.) Anonymous photographer. Inner Mongolia, 1940's.

Comments:

This photograph is obviously posed with the people involved not necessarily being archers. As you can see the bow is not in balance. Either one limb was damaged and lost its strength, or the bow was strung by an inexperienced person and not balanced right after stringing. The arrows on the back also seem to be connected with a thin cord, perhaps affixed for display purposes.



2.) "Mongol Archer of the Prince His Ssu Ning. Chahar District." (Present-day Eastern Inner Mongolia.) Photographed during the Citroën Trans-Asiatic Expedition, 1931-1932.

Comments:

This escort looks the part with a well-made Qing military style bow and what seem to be a bundle of Qing style military arrows. Also notice how the man in the foreground wears his saber, edge down, hilt backwards, just like the Qing troops.



3.) Mongolian Archers, silver print, circa 1930. Anonymous soviet photographer. The original is for sale for \$300,- at anahitaphotoarchive.com

Comments:

Two Mongolian archers who -judging from the type of arrow used- are engaged in Mongolian *sur* shooting that involves shooting a row of "baskets" made of woven rawhide. The bow ears here are still relatively long and slender, more Manchu like than the traditional Mongolian bows used today. The feather length also seems indicative of Manchu influence.

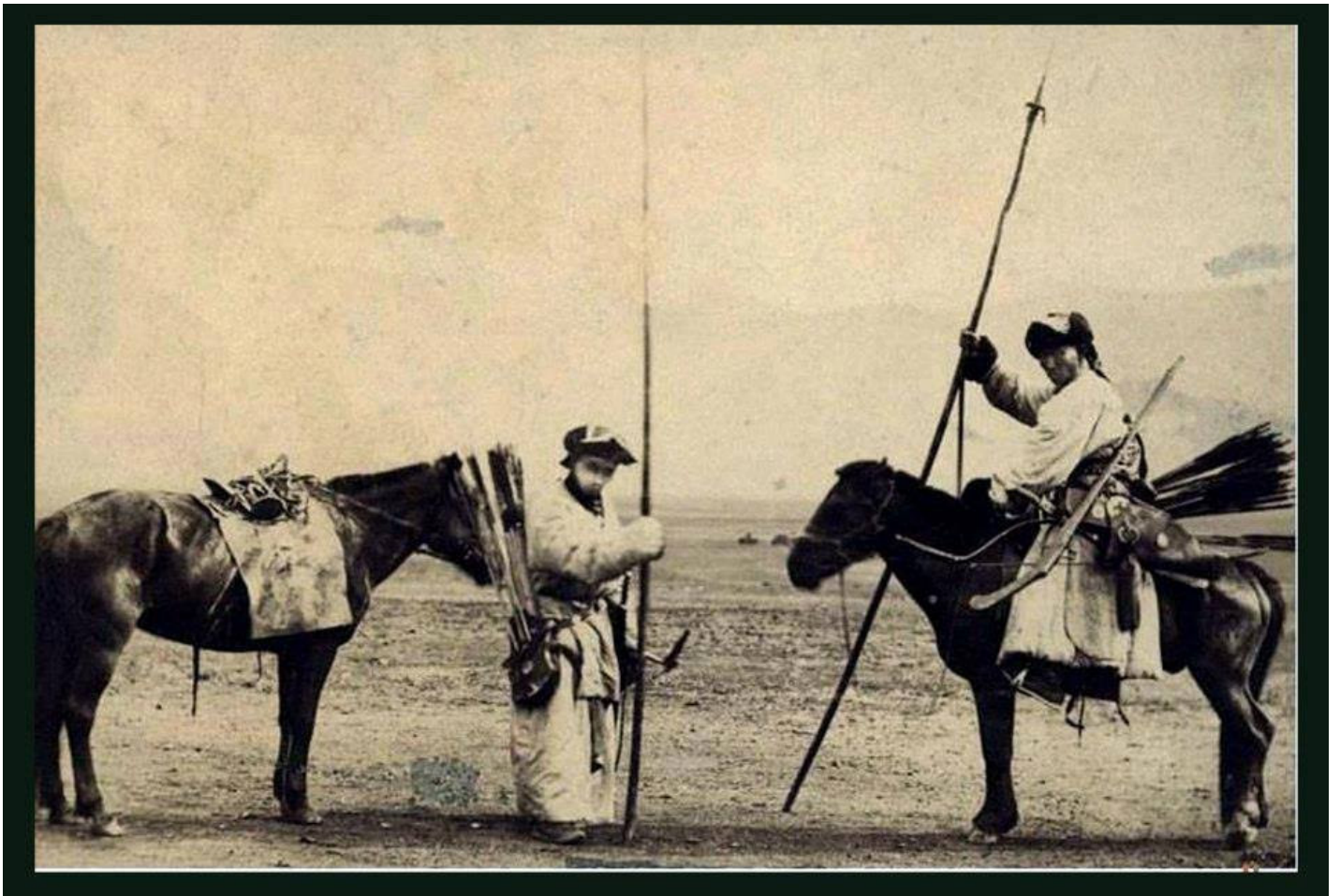


Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

4.) Mongolian warrior in full gear. Anonymous photographer. Circa 1900. From the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Comments:

This man is shown posing in full gear. You can see the photograph is staged, because the string is too long for the bow: The ears point more upwards than they should and the string knot does not fall on the string bridge. It is clearly the string of a different, larger bow. The equipment is otherwise correct for a Mongol warrior serving the Qing army and includes a matchlock musket, a lot of Qing style arrows, Manchu bow, bow case, and a Qing military pattern saber or *peidao*. The equipment stayed pretty much the same from the 17th century all the way up to the early 19th century when breech-loading firearms finally got the best of the highly mobile mounted archers of the Manchu, Mongol and Chinese banners.



5.) Another photograph of the same man as #4. Anonymous photographer. Possibly in the same collection.



6.) Mongolian archers on horseback, 1930's

Comments:

Two Mongolian archers on horseback with strung bows and some arrows. From the personal collection of Ben Judkins. Published online in his article: [Through a Lens Darkly \(21\): Chinese Archery's Troubled Republic Era Revival](#).

Buryat archers

1.) Buryat Mongolian mounted archer. Photo by Piotr Shimkevich, 1895.

Comments:

A Buryat mounted archer. Although the arrows seem to be standard issue Qing military, his bow appears to be of the shorter, native Buryat type. Hey, if the Buryats could keep to their own bow design up to 1895, archery may not have been banned after all! (See my rant on top of this page if this doesn't make much sense to you.)



2.) Buryat archer. Unknown photographer and date.

Comments:

A Buryat archer with his bow and arrows. These arrows seem to be of Buryat design with shorter fletchings. Typical for Buryat bows, the ears are short and are not pointing forward when strung. This bow design makes it a relatively fast, stable bow capable of shooting medium size and weight arrows at decent velocities. Bows of comparable design are found all over the cold regions of Siberia and are likely a response to the effect of extreme cold on the various materials where a long ear might break more easily when frozen. Read more about the Buryat bow on ATARN.ORG.



3.) Buryat archer from a Russian postcard. Unknown photographer and date.

Comments:

A rare image of a Buryat archer pulling his bow. In typical Buryat garb and equipment. Probably late 19th to early 20th century.

Comments, questions? Discuss Manchu archery in our Facebook group:



Want to see them in motion? See:



[Mongolian archery footage](#)

- - - Do you know of any more Manchu, Mongolian or Tibetan archery pictures not listed here? If so, **DO** let me know! - - -