

# Lessons in Manchu Archery Series

## Thoughts on *Niyamniyambi* - Manchu Horseback Archery

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Even the most experienced foot archer will find his or her first efforts from horseback troublesome. Being on horse limits one's body movements and requires the archer to



**Figure 1: A Manchu horseback archer as illustrated in the *Pratique des Ex-omens Militares en China*, published 1896. Note the 30 degree tilt of his bow and the short draw to the jaw in comparison with the longer, full foot archery draw to the string hand shoulder joint.**

shoot at unusual angles compared with foot archery. The mounted archer also often finds that his or her draw length is decreased for most shots as the body position and horse do not allow for a full draw. This is particularly true for shots forward and back of the usual lateral direction one typically shoots on foot and for downward shots. The differences between foot and mounted archery can be such that one new to horseback archery might feel "everything is different." Concerning archery of the Qing period in China, the Manchus indeed felt that the methods of foot and mounted archery were different enough to approach them as different arts, going so far as to call them by different names. Shooting from foot in Manchu is *gabtambi*, while horseback archery is referred to a *niyamniyambi*.

The most significant divergence between foot and mounted archery is the difference in draw length and cant of the bow. In the Manchu style of archery, the bow is drawn to where the string touches the body. One set of basic guide lines in Manchu archery is the Five Levels and Three Contacts (五平三靠, *wu ping san kao*). The Three Contacts are the bow string touching the torso, the the nock touching the arrow, and the the arrow touching the face. When standing on one's own feet, the string only comes in to contact with the body when the string hand arm reaches a point opposite the shoulder joint. When the string hand arm has reached this position, the elbow will be behind the shoulder. Manchu archery employs a rounded upper body that allows for this particularly long draw (see my earlier work: *Traditional Manchu Archery of the Qing Imperial Guard*). When shooting from horseback in all but one position the archer must compensate for the length of the bow. This is because either the string comes into contact with the body well before full draw or the ear (*siyah*) will come into contact the horse restricting the draw length. The one shooting position where this is not the case is when one is shoot-



**Figure 2: Detail, Painting, "Qianlong Hunting with his son."**



**Figure 3:**  
Detail from “Qian-long Emperor Hunting Rabbits.” Note the emperor’s draw length is considerable less than that seen in the painting below of him shooting on foot.

**Figure 4: (right)**  
Detail from “Qian-long Shooting Painted Screen (乾隆射箭圖屏),” painted by the french Jesuit Jean Denis Attiret (Chinese name 王致誠; Wáng Zhì Chéng). The emperor was an expert bowman who often demonstrated correct technique for Manchu officials.

aminations, archery contests, and imperial hunt paintings from the period have survived. There are also woodblock prints in the *Veritable History of the Qing* (清實錄, *Qing Shilu*) that depict both mounted and foot archers. While not uniform, a number of observations may be drawn from these paintings.

The first obvious difference is that there are two categories: mounted military archery and mounted hunting archery. While on the surface these two may seem similar, if not the same, there are some important differences. The most important of these differences is that when hunting, one’s quarry can not shoot back at you. Also, when hunting in a group from horseback, as the Manchus often did, all riders are generally aiming for the same quarry. On the battlefield, each archer is selecting his target, loosing his arrow, and moving to the next target. In battle, the bannerman often had to rapidly acquire his target and shoot to ensure that enemy did not shoot him first. The hunter had a little more time to line up a good shot. The extra time could be used to ride into a position where one would loose the arrow when directly to the quarry’s side. So in comparison with the shorter draw that can be observed in period battle paintings, this would explain why the draw used by the Qianlong emperor seen in paintings of him hunting from horse is the same as the long draw he used when shooting on foot. His retinue kept his quarry from escaping while he rode to the best position.

Battle paintings record a much shorter draw than the Qianlong emperor is illustrated employing. Illustrations of mounted archers in combat typically shows the archer drawing

ing directly to the bow arm side at a target distant enough not have to aim down at. This restriction in the draw length necessitates the use of a completely different anchor point. It should be noted that while I am using the term anchor point out of convenience, no Qing period Manchu archery manual makes use of any such term or equivalent. The question then is what anchor point was used by mounted bannermen during the Qing period.

The lack of written descriptions of an anchor point for mounted archery necessitates looking to the visual record in the form of period paintings and illustrations. Fortunately, a wealth of battle, imperial ex-





**Figure 5:** Detail from “Archery Contest at the Court of the Qianlong Emperor.” Note that when shooting forward toward the target, the archer is not able to come to full draw leaving significant length of his arrow protruding in front of his bow.

however compensate for the long Manchu bow in every position. When shooting almost directly forward from the “Parting the Horse’s Mane” posture, (分鬃式, *Fen Zhong Shi*, see figure 6 below) the lower bow ear will bump into the horse, interfering with the draw. The same is true when shooting almost directly to the rear from the “Brush the Back Strap” Posture, (抹鞅式, *Mo Qiu Shi*) or the at a steep downward angle, such as when shooting the ground ball in the imperial military exam. The only technique that compensates for this is tilting the bow in the direction toward the front of the torso. This position can be seen in one nineteenth century photo of a Buryat Mongol archer (figure 6 below) as well as in figure 1 on the first page. These images show the archer tilting his bow approximately 30 degrees toward to the front side side of his body, the right side for right-handed archers.

Combining the shorter draw with the tilting of the bow compensates for problems Manchu style archers encounter on horseback. This method is also slightly faster than coming to full draw and so is well-suited to racing by on horse while quickly acquiring one target and then the next. Furthermore, this method is different enough from that employed by the foot archer to be considered a different art.

Ideally, a Qing period manual for horseback archery will come to light that clearly illustrates proper mounted techniques. (I am currently working on translating both Qing and Ming period works on horseback archery). Until that time, experimentation and period illustrations will guide our training. As new material comes to light, we may have to refine or change our technique. Until then, the technique presented here conforms with what we know and is delivering results.

the arrow to below his lower lip. A similar anchor position can also be observed in photos of Manchu archers from late in the dynasty.

The shorter mounted draw alone does not



**Figure 6:** The caption reads, “Buryat on a horse with a bow. Zabaikalskaya region.” (This region is near lake Baikal). Note how he has tilted his bow so that the ear of the lower limb is outside his left thigh.