

Lessons in Manchu Archery -

Using the Manchu Style Archer's Ring

by Scott M. Rodell

When the Manchus toppled the remnants of the Ming dynasty and established the Qing, they also brought a new set of archery tackle to the Empire. The archer's ring they introduced to China is of a completely different shape and design than was in use throughout the country under the Ming court. It is also different from those archer's rings used in neighboring Korea and Mongolia or in Tibet. This Manchu type archer's ring was a simple cylinder. One of the main advantages it had over the rings used under the Ming, was that it couldn't rotate out of proper alignment when shooting. The Manchu type ring can also be worn comfortably at the base of the thumb while not shooting.

The ability to wear the Manchu type archer ring when not shooting and engaging in other activities offers very real tactical advantages. This is because when the ring sits at the base of the thumb it in no way interferes with the soldier's swordplay or the wielding of other weapons. With a simple quick flick of his fingers, a Bannerman could, in a moment, transition from shooting his bow to wielding his saber. This quick transition had an obvious battlefield advantage over having to pause to remove and pocket one's archer's ring. (See Image 1).

Naturally, in order to begin learning how to use the cylindrical type of archer's ring used during the Qing dynasty, one has to first obtain or make one. During the Qing period, archer's rings were made from a variety of materials. These materials ranged from bone and antler of the game they hunted, to hard stone and jade. Particularly, decorative thumb rings were even made from porcelain and glass, though obviously, these were purely decorative and never intended for use. Qing era Ban-

nermen wore thumb rings as everyday jewelry, as symbols of their martial prowess and heritage. User thumb rings were typically made of antler or bone.



Image 1- Manchu Bannerman Officer Badai practicing a deflect-punch movement with his thumb ring at the base of his thumb.

Contemporary Manchu style archers can obtain thumb rings through online auctions, where a fair number of hard stone archer thumb rings are offered as antiques (though they are typically modern reproductions). My company, Seven Stars Trading Co., also offers hardwood versions of Manchu archer rings as blanks that are easily sized to a custom fit with sand paper and a

wooden dowel. Those interested in making their own thumb ring can find suppliers of hardwood and antler on-line. Some modern practitioners have also experimented with acrylic and molding rings out of material like auto body filler.

The Manchu archer's ring itself is essentially a simple cylinder with the top inside edge beveled at a 30 to 45 degree angle and the bottom end squared off. The top end is the end that the thumb protrudes through. It is beveled to allow the archer to bend his or her thumb at the interphalangeal (IP) Joint in the middle of thumb. Bending the thumb at this joint locks the ring in place on the thumb when drawing and releasing. When slipped onto the thumb, the ring itself should be snug, but not tight. A properly fitting Manchu archer's ring will not slip off the thumb when the hand is hanging down. But the ring should be loose enough that the index and second finger of the string hand can easily slide the ring from its shooting position, astride the IP joint, down the thumb to the base of that finger (See image X for the proper shooting position). Note that the thumb will swell in the course of shooting, so a ring that is very snug when first put on, may become difficult to remove after shooting.



Image 2 - Note that the thumb of the string hand is only slightly cocked when wrapping around the bow string.

When using the Manchu type archer's ring to shoot, the bowstring rests on the base of the ring. In order to keep the bowstring firmly against the ring's base, the thumb is only slightly cocked to hook around the string. Bending the thumb too far will result in the bowstring slipping off the ring and digging into the flesh of the thumb. In comparison with using the more commonly known lipped archer's ring that was employed during the Ming period, and is used in Mongolian and Korean

archery, when using the Manchu type archer's ring, the string hand thumb is much less bent. Those who have trained with the lipped type archer's ring will likely find that they bend the thumb too far at first, when transitioning to using the Manchu type cylindrical ring.

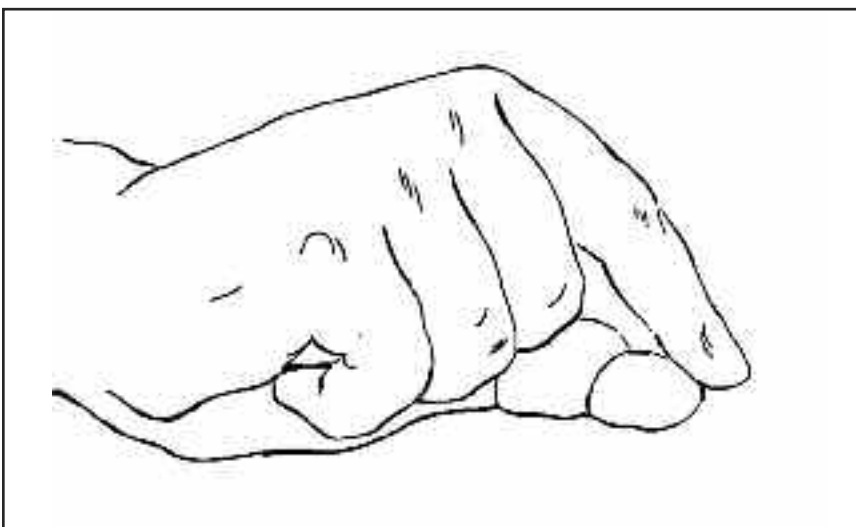


Image 3 - The string hand as illustrated in the 18th c, Arts Militaire Des Chinois.

When using a Manchu type ring, with an arrow nocked, the thumb of the string hand engages the bowstring just below the arrow, so that the ring is just touching the arrow shaft. (See Image 2). Then, with the three smaller fingers curled into a loose fist, the index finger of the



Image 3- Manchu Archer at full draw. Photo Courtesy the Rob Oechsle Collection. Note how the index finger is wrapped over the top of the thumb. of the string hand.

string hand wraps over the top of the thumb and rests on the top edge of the thumb ring. (See Image 5 3, 4 and 5). With the string hand in this position, the wrist is turned slightly to apply pressure to the side of the arrow to hold it in place against the bow. (For a detailed description on loading the bow, please see: Lessons in Manchu Archery – Loading and Nocking). The bow can then be raised and the arrow drawn.

Once at full draw, loose the arrow by releasing and opening the thumb and index finger. In order to hold the ring firmly in place during the release, the IP joint, in the middle of thumb, should remain cocked. Ideally, the opening of the thumb takes place entirely at the Metacarpophalangeal (MP) Joint at base of thumb. This can take some practice and those new to this technique may find that their ring slides up the thumb with the release, particularly if the ring is too loose. This sliding can result in bruising to the thumb where the upper end of the ring pushes into the pad of the thumb. Given that some test shots will be required to adjust one's thumb ring and find the right fit, it wise to begin the process with a lighter draw weight bow than one is use to training with.

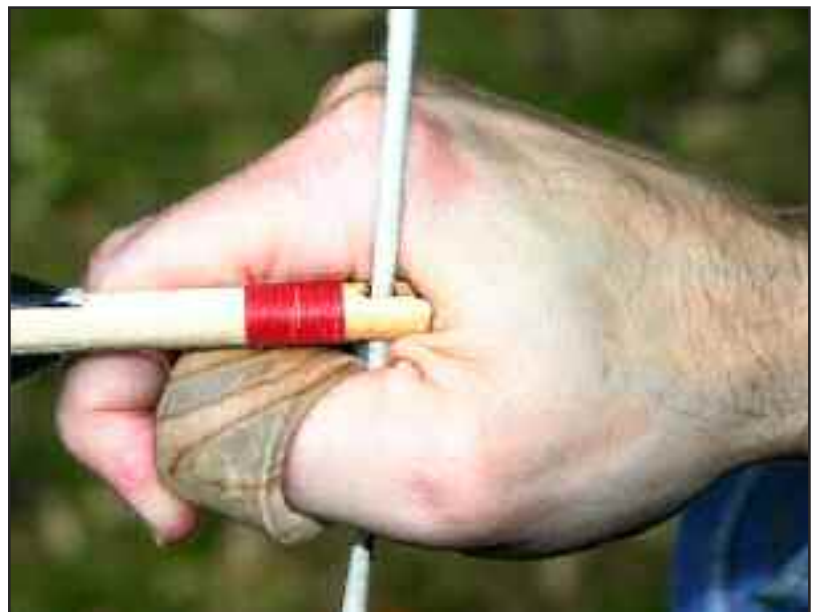


Image 5 - The index finger of the string hand rest atop the thumb ring.

With a crisp release, the string hand should arc backward, in the opposite direction from the target in a vertical arc. Arcing the string hand back along a horizontal plane typically results in plucking the string away from the chest, when using thumb rings. While the release should be crisp, the string hand should arc back in a relaxed manner. Flinging the string hand back forcefully tends to shake one's structure, or pull the string downward in a manner that will throw the shot off.

For more information about Manchu Archery, please see:

<http://www.grtc.org/manchuarchery/>

<http://www.facebook.com/groups/ManchuArchery/>