

# Manchu Rule over China and the Attrition of the Manchu Language

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## 1. A Brief Account of the History of the Manchus and the Manchu Speaker in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

### 1.1 The Manchus

A brief account of the various Chinese names referring to the Manchus:

Shāng (16<sup>th</sup>-11th c. B.C.) and Western Zhōu (11<sup>th</sup> c. -771 B.C.) dynasties: **Sùshèn** 肅慎  
→ Hàn dynasty(206 B.C.-A.D. 220) and the Western and Eastern Jin periods (A.D. 265-420):  
**Yílóu** 挹婁 → Northern Wèi period (A.D.386-534): **Cōngjí** 勿吉 → Suí dynasty (A.D.  
581-618) and Táng dynasty (A.D.618-907): **Jiēmò** 靺鞨 → Sòng dynasty (A.D. 960-1279)  
and Míng dynasty (A.D. 1368-1644): **Nǚzhēn**女真 (or Jurchen).

### 1.2 Native Manchu Language Speakers in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

The language of the Manchus belongs to a Tungusic language group in the Altaic language family. According to the China census report, in 1990 there were 9,821,180 Manchus in China. However, less than one hundred people (mostly residing in the Manchu Village in Sanjiazi in Qiqiha'er, Heilongjiang Province) could be considered native speakers of the Manchu language, and these people were all quite old. Unless a new generation of native Manchu speakers carries the language forward, Manchu will soon become a dead language.





## 2. The Qing Success as Rulers of China and the Attrition of Manchu Language

The Manchus occupied all of China from 1644 to 1911 A.D. Although both Manchu and Chinese were official languages of the imperial court, there was a significant shift among the Manchus from being monolingual Manchu speakers (before 1660s) to bilingual Manchu and Chinese speakers (1660s- 1790s) and then to monolingual Chinese speakers (after 1790s).

### 2.1 Three Major Qing Periods

- Early Qing—the reign periods of Nurhachi (1616-1626), Huang Taiji (1627-1643), and Shunzhi (1644-1661): Almost all of the Manchus only knew the Manchu language.
- Middle Qing—the reign periods of Kangxi (1662-1722), Yongzheng (1722-1736), and Qianlong (1736-1796): Almost all of the Manchus were bilingual speakers of Manchu and Chinese.
- Late Qing—from the reign period of Jiaqing (1796-1820 ) until the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911: Very few Manchus could speak the Manchu language.

### 2.2 The Policy of Qing Rulers and the Attrition of Manchu Language

In the official Chinese historical accounts:

1. In the third year of the Yongzheng reign (1725), the Bureau of Personnel recommended that the Administration of Justice fill open positions with Manchus who had mastery of the Chinese language. As a result, there were times when a Manchu official presenting a memorial to Emperor Yongzheng was unable to speak Manchu. (*Qing Shizong shilu*, vol. 35)
2. In 1776, the fortieth year of the Qianlong reign, a Manchu high official, Guo'ermin, could not understand what the emperor said in Manchu. What shocked the emperor even more was that this Manchu official came from Shengjing, the homeland of the Manchus. (*Qing Gaozong shilu*, vol. 35)

3. Linning, a Manchu general from Shengjing, was not proficient in the Manchu language. He even had to use Chinese to write a simple memorial reporting that there were no locusts in his locality. Emperor Qianlong harshly scolded him. (*Qing Gaozong shilu*, vol. 35)

### 3. The Manchus versus the Mongols

The rule of China led to very different results for the Mongols than for the Manchus.

-- cultural gap

--policies in ruling China

The Manchus:

“Qimin you bie 旗民有別” (that Manchus and Chinese should reside separately)→ “the Manchus and Chinese are of the same family 满汉一家”

vs.

The Mongols segregated Chinese from Mongols

--language policy

--preparation before entering China

#### --Sovereignty vs. Ethnic Identity

### 4. Conclusion

The number of Manchus totaled at most two percent of the population of their empire, and the success of the Manchus in controlling most of the immensely populous Chinese region as legitimate holders of the imperial power for two hundred and sixty-seven years was largely due to their imperial policy toward the Chinese, and their embrace of Chinese culture, customs and so on. The Manchus' acceptance of Chinese culture led to a blurring of distinctions between the two groups with the result that there are now very few, if any, genuine Manchu language native speakers left in the world. The same factors that led to the Manchus' success in ruling China also led to the attrition of the Manchu language and the loss of a distinct Manchu culture.

