

LECTERN

**INDEPENDENT
JOURNAL OF
STUDENTS**

Title: Rise of The Manchu Dragon

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Published by Lectern Journal

Edited by Ahmet Haktan Canpolat

Lectern Journal, Vol. 1, Iss. 1, October 2025, pp. 121-129

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Abstract

This paper examines the emergence of Manchu ethnicity in the seventeenth century and its interrelation with the Eight Banners institution during the formation and consolidation of the Qing dynasty. Focusing on the transformation of Jurchen clans into a unified Manchu identity, it explores how the Banner system dissolved tribal affiliations, integrated diverse groups such as Mongols and Han Chinese, and established new social and legal distinctions between bannermen and commoners. The analysis highlights the dual role of the Eight Banners as both a military and socio-political structure, emphasizing their significance in constructing Manchu identity through shared practices, legal frameworks, and cultural values known as the “Manchu Way.” By considering cases such as the Nikans and Hanjun bannermen, the study demonstrates the complexity and fluidity of ethnicity and status within the Banner system, challenging simplified notions of ethnic differentiation and underscoring the nuanced processes behind the rise of Manchuness and the consolidation of Qing imperial power.

Keywords: Manchu Ethnicity; Eight Banners; Qing Dynasty; Jurchens; Ethnicity And Status



China or the Middle Kingdom has been ruled by many dynasties in its thousands of years of political history until the 20th century. In its political history, China was also ruled many times by non-Han Chinese dynasties for example, Mongol originated the Yuan dynasty, Tangut originated short lived Shun dynasty or China's last dynasty, Manchu originated Qing dynasty. The Qing Dynasty, as the last one, controlled China more than two hundred years and shaped its modern history from 1644 to 1912. However, as Mark Elliot argued, the Manchu conquest of China and the establishment of hundreds of years long Manchu dynasty was not an expected phenomenon in the early 17th century (2001:3).

When we look at this period of Chinese history, a lot of questions can come to our minds like how did a semi-nomadic very clan-based society form a unified ethnicity, conquer the China and ruled it for 267 years as a small alien minority among the vast majority conquered subjects? In this paper, I will attempt to answer a part of this question in the sense of relationship between appearance of the Manchu ethnicity and appearance of the Manchu socio-military organisation, the Eight Banners which was the most crucial institution for the Manchu rule over the Middle Kingdom (Porter 2018:1). I will briefly discuss three issues in this paper: Manchus' situation before becoming the 'Manchus', status and ethnicity differentiation in the Banner system, and lastly ethnicity related patterns and practices in Banner armies during the 17th and early 18th centuries.

When we examined the situation of Manchus before 16th century, we see that there was no Manchuness as an ethnicity or nationality, just Jurchen and few Mongol clans who had a pastoral and semi-nomadic lifestyle, and complicated relations with Ming dynasty rule in Nurgan region (Elliot 2001:47,48) (Crossley 1999:58). We can separate these clans into three main groups: Jianzhou Jurchens, Haixi Jurchens, and Yeren Jurchens which all of them were under the authority of Ming state (Elliot 2001:48). In the second half of the 16th century, Haixi and Jianzhou clans began to develop closer trade relations with Ming China such as dogs, falcons, horses, pine seeds, or ginseng and exchanged them with silk or cash in trade town Fushun (Crossley 1999:71). Moreover, in the late 15th century, Jianzhou Jurchens also started farming more seriously (Elliot 2001:50).

It might be a speculation, but these two developments might have some impact on Jianzhou Jurchen's differentiation from other groups because after all, Jianzhou Jurchens had never been the most powerful group among Jurchens as Elliot discuss, and the leader who banded together all Jurchen clans in Nurgan was



the leader of Jianzhou Left Branch, Nurhaci (2001:56). In 1583, when he was 24, Nurhaci became the leader of his branch. In 1593, he managed to defeat the alliance of Haixi Jurchens and Mongols; and in 1616 he declared the new khanate of Later Jin in the name of the former Jurchen dynasty which ruled China for 119 years. In later years, Nurhaci defeated Ming forces in Liaodong in 1618, and captured the whole Liaodong peninsula and Liaoxi in between 1618 and 1622 (Crossley 1999:59,94,136) (Elliot 2001:56,75). Finally, by the year 1625, he declared the city of Shenyang (lately renamed as Mukden) which was the centre of the Liaodong province as the capital city of the Later Jin dynasty. The province itself become a major source of income that served the Jurchen elite, Nurhaci's heir Hong Taiji, and Later Jin state before the whole conquest of China in 1644.

In this whole process, one military institution was crucial for uniting whole Jurchen tribes and building Manchuness as a comprehensive identity for all Jurchens, which is the Eight Banners system. However, before discussing these features of the Eight Banners system, we should discuss the roots of this institution for a more in-depth evaluation. As Elliot defined, The Eight Banners was a hybrid institution which combined military, social, economic, and political aspects (2001:40). Again, Elliot's book is a great source for understanding Eight Banners' establishment. As he discusses, there was a smooth but still questionable transition from niru as the small Jurchen hunting units to military-niru as a division under gusa or banner (2001:58) (Porter 2018:4).

Of course, there were some differences between hunting nirus and military nirus. Military nirus are much larger than its predecessor, their size was approximately 300 people; and most significantly it was a permanent unit unlike its hunting version or other Inner Asian units. Each uksin or soldier was accompanied by his household (Elliot 2001:58). Most commonly accepted date for establishment of the Eight Banner is 1615 (Elliot 2001:59) (Rhoads 2000:18). However, as both Elliot and David Porter argue, we can see banners as military before 1615: While Elliot claims that there were some Korean sources which mention banner units, Porter says that there were established four banner units after 1601 under the command of senior princes and officers as yellow, blue, red and white banners; and they doubled in 1615 (2001:59) (2018:4).

At the end, Eight Banners armies were heterogenous divisions which got together from Jurchen tribes, Mongol tribes and Han Chinese (Rhoads 2000:19). However, before discussing ethnic part of Banner



system, there is another point which we should discuss, which is the concept of status in early Qing China. While ethnicity was a central concept for banner system, status is also crucial for understanding it. Status or practically status groups are systems which members of different groups are subject from birth to different forms of administrative, cultural, social, and legal systems (Porter 2024:23). In the Qing system we see an ethnicity-based differentiation of subjects in sense of legal and administration systems: Mongols were subject to Mongol Legal Code and Hans were subject to Chinese Legal Code. Nevertheless, as Porter discusses, in the banner system, all soldiers faced the same legal system including Manchus, Mongols and even Hanjuns (2024:38). Therefore, we can say that before ethnic differentiation in banners which is crucial for Manchuness, there was a more fundamental separation between bannermen and commoners in Qing China which was more flexible than ethnicity (Porter 2024:41).

If we try to define concept of ethnicity as a sociological concept, with combining both Weberian and Durkheimian approaches, we can say: a type of constructed relationship in human populations based on shared ancestry, association with a territory myths, language, history, religion, culture, and shared solidarity upon these values (Giddens, Sutton 2020:46) (Jackson 1982:8) (Malczewski 2018:53). As Elliot argues, we can see these elements in the Manchu case: shared myth of coming from the same ancestors who were first four emperors of Qing, recorded lineage, Nurgan as shared geography, shared language, and shared semi-nomadic culture. In a social group like Jurchens that tribal connections were still powerful, building an identity of ethnicity is not a simple process. Significance of Eight Banners appears in this point. As I mentioned, banner units were social units as well as military units: soldiers were accompanied by their households; things like births, marriages, adoptions, deaths, and employment were declared to the banners (Porter 2018:40).

However, in its first decades, banner organisation was not socially too strict one: the original chieftains were generally maintained their positions, and the system was slightly disturbing original tribal organization, especially the ones who voluntarily submitted Nurhaci. On the other hand, forcefully joined Jurchens such as Haixi Jurchens generally were divided into various nirus. Forcefully joinment situation made their tribal affiliation weaker than before because they lost their connection and majority position. Mixing of the tribes eventually weakened all tribal affiliations among Jurchens and created an empty space for the appearance of Manchuness (Porter 2018:61). Furthermore, Nurhaci's policy of attending soil to banner companies as a source of revenue weakened tribal economic bonds and strengthened their connection to Qing emperors and



eventually Manchu identity (Elliot 2001:62). In 1635, this process gained its name with the official declaration of Manchuness of all Jurchens by emperor Hong Taiji.

One of the first ethnic differentiations in Nurhaci's state and banner system was difference between Jurchens who live in East Nungan and Nikans in the West Nungan who were a collection of Hans, Koreans and Jurchens (Crossley 1999:90). It was a complex and nuanced differentiation because while some Han Chinese originated Nikans became members of Hanjun Banners after 1620s; on the other hand, also some Nikans including Chinese originated ones who fought for Nurhaci before 1620s became a part of Jurchen Banners and became Manchus (Crossley 1999:98). Therefore, when we argue about ethnicity in Banner system, we should understand it as a complex and intersectional concept. A case like Nikans shows us that sometimes in ethnicity building, solidarity can become more significant than common ancestry. However, we should also emphasize that in the same period, Mongol companies in Jurchen Banners were officially separated from their Jurchen counterparts; so even in first years of the banner system, Nurhaci and Jurchens had a sense of ethnicity, they knew that they are different from Mongols, and Nikans' situation was exception in Later Jin and Qing periods.

Since its first years, Later Jin state used Han Chinese soldiers as Nikans. After 1621, with the conquest of Liaodong peninsula, Han soldiers were widely used by Manchus, but after their revolt in 1625, Han armies mostly disbanded. By 1631, emperor Hong Taiji reestablished Han Armies and renamed them as Hanjun in 1634 (Porter 2018:5). In 1635, the same year as the declaration of Manchuness, the first separate Mongol Banners were established by Hong Taiji. Then we can say that in the early 1630s the most crucial peoples of banners structure, Manchus, Hans and Mongols, were organized. When other ethnicities join the empire, new banners were established such as Russians or Chahars (Porter 2024:43). However, unlike other ethnicities, Manchus had to carry a banner membership (Porter 2018:7). During Hong Taiji's rule, Eight Banners became a successful tool for the conquest of Ming. While there was a segregation between ethnicities in banners which was another crucial aspect for building Manchu identity, banners played a crucial role in the formation of Qing China with the expansion of Mongol and Hanjun banners after 1644.

Despite the fact that Nationalist government in 1911 and the CCP government after 1949 accepted that every person who have bannerman descendants can be a Manchu, the case in the 17th century was more complicated than that (Elliot 2001:15) (Porter 2018:2). As we discussed, there was a clear separation



between commoners and bannerpeople in the sense of status. Moreover, banners themselves were strictly separated in the sense of ethnicity. The Tong case was a great example of it: Tongs were a significant family for the Qing military and administration, and they were early supporters of Qing dynasty, even Tong Guogang was the maternal uncle of Kangxi emperor. When Tong Guogang requested to be a part of a Manchu Banner rather than a Hanjun Banner, only a very small part of his family was granted with position in Manchu Yellow Banner by the emperor (Crossley 1999:113) (Porter 2018:17). Of course there is a reason behind this situation: The Hanjun bannermen were significantly ranked below Manchu and Mongol counterparts (Porter 2018:22). Moreover, this hierarchy showed itself in differences in the number of high salaried and respected administrative and military positions which available to members of bannermen. There was an exclusion of Hanjun bannermen from these ranks (Porter 2024:44) (Porter 2018:55).

There was an ethnic discrimination in favour of Manchus and Mongols in the banner system. Nevertheless, even in the early 18th century, emperors and Qing state wanted to maintain Hanjun's access to the key privileges of banner status such as keeping Hanjun socially and legally separate from other non-bannerman Hans (Porter 2018:26,40). The main reason behind this situation might be that Qing dynasty's need for mediators between itself and Han literati. In the sense of commonality in banners, debates on 'Manchu Way' provide us an interesting case for the formation of Manchu ethnicity. Manchu Way as Elliot defined, was the sum of the bannerman values like archery, horse-riding, ability in the Manchu language etc (2001:8). Phrases like "the old Manchu usages", "Manchu customs", and "the old customs" makes us think that bannerman lifestyle is crucial for building Manchuness. However, as Porter argues, this case also have some nuances: Manchu language was not simply a feature of ethnic Manchus, but a must for banner status, all banner people including Hanjun were expected to be proficient in Manchu (2018:27).

Furthermore, the codes of the Manchu Way were not requested from only Manchus for proficiency. All bannermen, no matter what their ethnic origins were, had to show the same physical and language performances as the members of their units (Porter 2018:41). "The old Manchu usages" were requested from all bannermen from all three banner groups (Porter 2018:48). Still, Manchu bannermen were expected to be better at these values rather than Hanjun counterparts by their superiors because fundamentally, those standards were accepted as traditional skills which were associated with the Manchu identity, (Porter 2018:47). However, Hanjun decline as a social position speeded up after the late 18th century especially in Qianlong Emperor's reign. The imperial edict permitting Hanjun to give up their banner status or relaxed view of intermarriage between the Hanjuns and common Hans in early 18th century might be evidence of



the decline. Manchu Way became less accessible to Hanjun, and the meaning of bannermanship during this period became more ethnical unlike the 17th century (Porter 2018:52). Moreover, ethnic division was not limited in the banners. Strategic cities which a garrison placed were divided into two separate parts, one for people in the banners and the other for local Han population (Elliot 2001:98). After the expulsion of Hanjuns began in Eight Banners, this division of the district might gain an ethnical meaning.

In conclusion, the issue of the appearance of Manchu ethnicity and its relationship with the Banner System in the 17th Century is a very nuanced and complicated subject. Eight Banners armies have an effect on three dynamics: Dissolution of tribal affiliation among Jurchen clans, uniting them into a Manchu ethnic identity, and structural differentiation of Manchus from other ethnic and social groups such as Hans as commoners, and Hanjuns and Mongols as subordinate counterparts. However, as Mark Elliot done in his book “The Manchu Way the Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China”, simplification of the ethnic differentiation in banners as the “Manchu Way” does not give us the whole picture in my opinion. The exceptional case of Nikans in the first decades of the Later Jin dynasty shows us that before structural differences were established in the 18th century, a shift from Han to Jurchen might happen. Furthermore, while Hanjun bannermen were discriminated from higher positions in Qing state and banners, they also had a higher status than common Hans, and the same proficiency was excepted by their superiors like Manchu counterparts in the 17th century.



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