

USING THE MANCHU THUMB RING

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By Peter Dekker

INTRODUCTION

Most traditional Asian composite bows were shot with a thumb ring. These rings come in various shapes, but most frequently have a lip making them shaped somewhat like a teardrop. The basic use of these is relatively straightforward, although perfecting these releases often still takes considerable practice. Another major group of thumb rings are cylindrical rings. They were probably introduced into China by the Manchus somewhere around the 17th century and have become the standard ring in China since. Often, you will simply find them designated as "Chinese thumb ring" for this reason. The technique to use these is quite different from regular thumb ring techniques and is more difficult to learn. This is why most people put these rings aside after their first try, thinking they are uncomfortable. But they're really not so uncomfortable when used right. The cylindrical Manchu rings provide a few advantages:

1. It provides an very crisp release.
2. It does not need to be aligned prior to use.
3. It can be worn all the time without being much in the way. Handy for switching from bow to other weapons quickly.



Fig 1.

Figure 1: Manchu thumb rings from the Ingo Simon collection, now part of the Manchester archery collection in the Manchester museum. The turquoise one is made of glazed porcelain, the ivory colored one is walrus tusk, the others are carved from jade / jadeite. With courtesy of the Manchester Museum. Photo by Richard Hornsby.

And Manchus did wear their cylindrical ring all the time, and they often knew whether they would become an archer by age five so they had plenty of time to get accustomed to the technique. Ambidextrous archers would wear a ring on each hand. Rings were made of all kinds of materials one could think of, from bone to antler, jade, glass, porcelain, ivory, rhinoceros horn, even dried gourds that were grown into shapes. Many of the very expensive rings, made of the most precious materials, were worn as we would wear jewellery today. Manchu Princess Der Ling described an official that wore a ring of perfect jade that cost about 2000 taels of silver in the early 20th century.

GETTING STARTED

Rings can be made or bought, there are some good imitations around on ebay. Trouble is that some are usually sold as "antique" with ditto prices in mind. It shouldn't be too tight, nor too loose. The heavier the bow used, the thicker you want the walls of the ring to be in order to divide the pressure over a larger area on your thumb. One end of the cylinder should be more convex, the other more concave. See cross-section on the left, which shows these sides in their most exaggerated form, much like the turquoise coloured ring in fig.1. How convex and concave these sides are varies a lot among antique rings, but there is almost always a notable difference. In wearing, the convex side will be near the base of the thumb, the concave part points towards the nail when worn. See figure 2 on the right for a schematic drawing I made of a ring in cross-section.

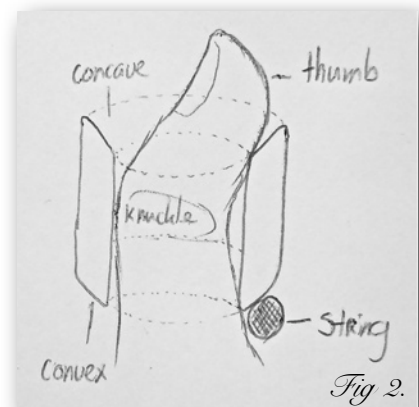


Fig 2.

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Fig 3.

When it came to use, Manchu archers seemed to have preferred bone thumb rings, even the emperor himself is seen with relatively simple bone thumb rings in various paintings, as are his men. In my experience the less refined ones with the most porous bone are oddly the most comfortable to use because they don't get as slippery as the smoother examples do. This is probably why even the rich still reached back to them when it came to serious shooting, even though they had many rings of deluxe materials in their possession.

Figure 3 a group of bone thumb rings from our collection. Some show considerable wear from use.

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With most thumb ring techniques the ring slides *over* the joint where it is held place, such as in figure 4. Not for the Manchu thumb ring, which sits *on* the joint of the thumb as in figure 5. When doing this wrong it can become very uncomfortable when drawing the bow, up to the point where it starts to cause internal bleeding in the thumb. The heavier the bow, the more unforgiving the ring. So start out with a light draw weight to get the basic technique under control in order to prevent damage to the thumb, and test your skill with heavier bows as you progress.

So the golden rule is: *Always keep the ring on the joint of the thumb.* At first this will feel counter-intuitive and one will have the feeling the ring will easily slip. But when done right, it is held firmly in place. Finding the exact position requires some trial and error per individual. Keep experimenting until you find the position that feels the most comfortable when drawing the bow, while still being able to maintain a firm grip on the ring so it won't slide. Placement also differs from ring to ring, some are just longer than others and will cover more or less of a part of the thumb which changes where the pressure is exerted. I tend to prefer those that are on the low side, such as the deer antler ring I use in this tutorial.



Fig 4.

Figure 4: The ring is pushed over the joint of the thumb. It may feel more secure but will push into the thumb when high-draw weight bows are used, causing damage to the thumb.



Fig 5.

Figure 5: The ring is sitting over the joint. It is held in place by the bending of the thumb. When pulling the bow, the thumb pad and pressure of the joint will keep it in place.



Figures 6 & 7: Different views of how the ring would be worn while drawing the bow.

DRAWING THE BOW

In the following pictures I show how to draw the bow with the ring. The observer may notice that my index finger does not lock the thumb as it would in other thumb ring techniques. Manchu archers in period photographs are seen using two techniques: One where the index finger touches the thumb, and another where it doesn't like I exhibit here. I have chosen this style for the tutorial in order to show that locking the thumb is not absolutely necessary when doing it right. This while most other style of thumb releases are unthinkable without locking the thumb. It is possible because with this technique the string rests much closer to the base of the thumb than with other techniques, giving it more leverage on the string. An important trick is twisting the hand to get a firm grip, shown on the next page.

Not locking the thumb with your index finger like I do here is a good test to see whether you are doing it right.



Figures 8 & 9: My index finger does not need to touch the thumb to hold the ring in place. To test your technique, try this with increasingly heavier bows. Eventually you should be able to pull the same weight as with your regular technique.



Figure 10, the twist: To secure your grip on the string the hand should twist into the string in the direction the black arrow indicates. This pushes the string nicely behind the ring. Do not exert too much pressure on the nock of the arrow, the finger there only touches enough to hold the arrow in place.

HOW DID THEY DO THAT WITH THOSE LONG FEATHERS?

Manchu arrows -especially later ones- often have really long feathers that are much longer than the brace height of the bow. See figures 11 and 12. This is to quickly stabilize them after release as the Manchu bow got increasingly focused in short distance shooting, while firearms were taking over the longer distances. When looking at photographs of late Manchu archers, we always see them in full draw with their feathers undisturbed. How did they do that?



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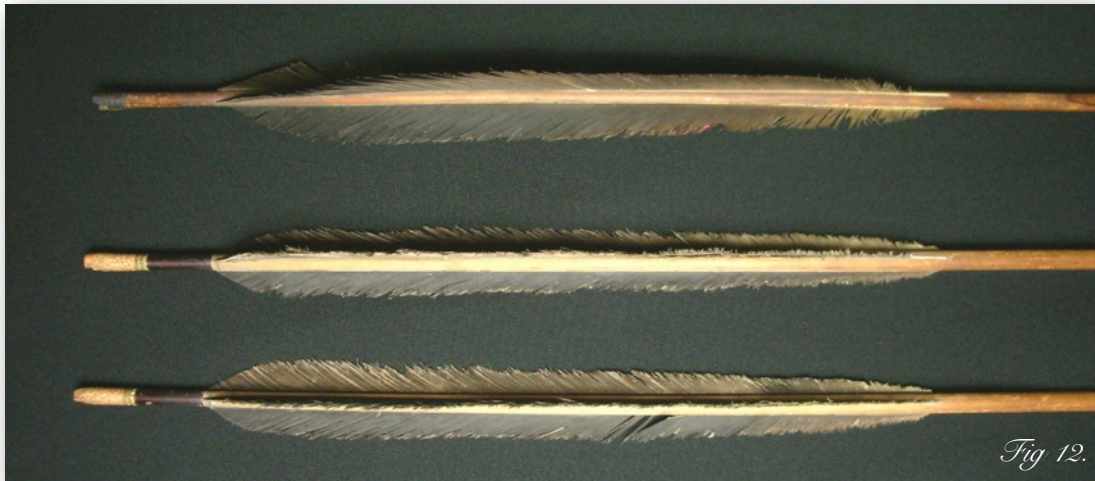


Figure 12: Three Manchu arrows of the 19th century. The top one with helical fletchings is a hunting arrow, the two on the bottom with straight fletchings are target arrows. From our own collection.

When looking at Manchu arrows closely one notices that those arrows with rather short fletchings, often dating to earlier times, have the fletchings start right after the nock. Those arrows with very long fletchings almost always have a rather long unfletched part at their tail end. That is because this part is used to get the long fletchings passed the bow handle. Here is how:



Manchus typically load a new arrow with the bow held horizontally such as in figure 13 above. Also see the 18th century depiction of a Manchu horseman on the next page. This not only provides the archer with a better field of view in-between shooting -the Manchu bow is a big bow- it also makes possible easier nocking. With the arrow nocked, the tail of the arrow rests on my index finger. This way I keep the arrow clear of the bow in the first stage of the draw, and only push the shaft against the bow once the feathers are cleared.

THANKS GO OUT TO

Hilary Greenland for publishing this tutorial in her SPTA newsletter and her ongoing support.

<http://www.traditional-archery.org/>

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www.atarn.org

Wendy Hodkinson for granting us access to the Manchester archery collection and granting permission to use the pictures we made.

Richard Hornsby for his support and the photos of our study trip to the Manchester Museum.



*Me examining some thumb rings in the Manchester museum reserve collection.
Picture courtesy of Richard Hornsby.*

