

Zeitschrift: Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie
Herausgeber: Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft
Band: 36 (1982)
Heft: 2

Artikel: The importance of Manchu
Autor: Underdown, Michael
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-146655>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 01.07.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

NOTIZ/NOTICE

THE IMPORTANCE OF MANCHU

MICHAEL UNDERDOWN (UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE)

In the Foreword to his *Mandschu-Grammatik* (Manchu Grammar),¹ the great German Sinologist Erich Haenisch recounts how, as a new student at the old Imperial University in Berlin in May 1899, he stood before the noticeboard of the Arts Faculty to choose an «unusual language» to study from the vast selection of courses available. His choice fell on Wilhelm Grube's course in Manchu grammar.

Although, of course, he did not realise it at the time, Haenisch was flying in the face of much contemporary (and later) opinion with regard to the importance of Manchu. A common view amongst Sinologists was that Manchu was of no importance. This attitude still exists, as A.F.P. Hulsewé showed in his review of Erich Haenisch's *Gestalten aus der Zeit der chinesischen Hegemoniekämpfe, Übersetzungen aus Sze-ma Ts'ien's Historischen Denkwürdigkeiten*:

The days are gone when the student of Chinese for lack of anything better had to turn in despair to Manchu translations.²

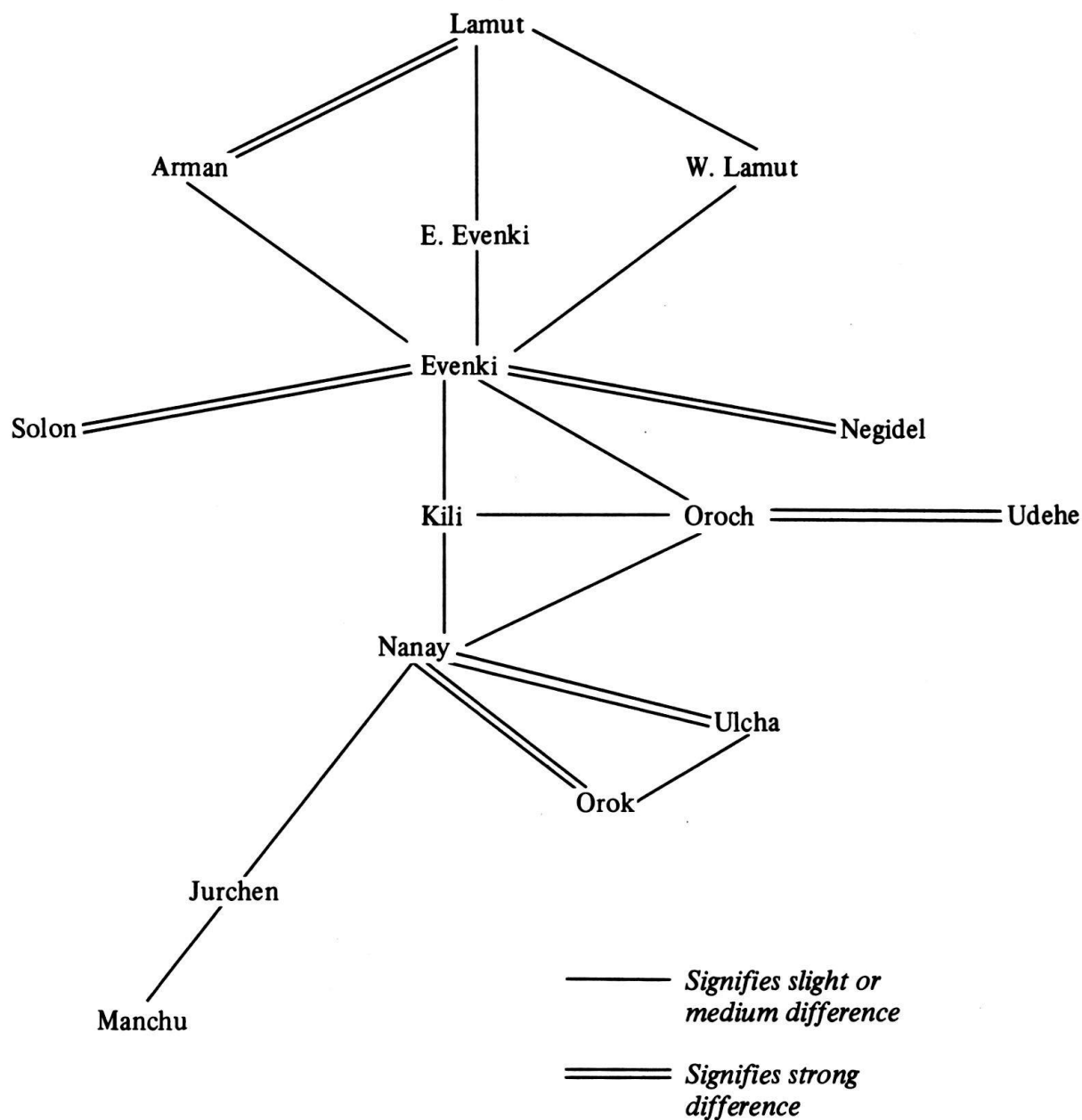
However, it is becoming less prevalent and, in any case, there have always been many eminent Sinologists and Altaicists besides Haenisch who have studied Manchu, including Klaproth, von der Gabelentz, Möllendorff, Grube, Radloff, von Zach, Kotwicz, Hauer, Fuchs and Gimm. Perhaps the most telling indictment of the detractors of Manchu was made by Haenisch when he pointed out that «they have one thing in common, that they do not know Manchu, nor have they worked with it.»³

Now, if one agrees with Jürgen Habermas that «there is an objective connection in all sciences between the research process and practice»

1 Erich Haenisch, *Mandschu-Grammatik. Mit Lesestücken und 23 Texttafeln*, Lehrbücher für das Studium der orientalischen Sprachen, Bd. VI (Leipzig/ VEB Verl. Enzyklopädie, 1961).

2 See *T'oung Pao*, LII (1965/66), 184.

3 Haenisch, *Mandschu-Grammatik*, 17.



which is immanent to those sciences,⁴ it is necessary, to justify the study of Manchu, to show that it is of practical value. This I propose to do by looking at two particular areas where the importance of Manchu can be demonstrated: linguistics and history/literature.

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *Protestbewegung und Hochschulreform*, edition suhrkamp 354 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1969), 245.

Manchu belongs to the Tungus group of the Altaic language family. Current thinking on the classification of this group is as follows:⁵

These languages are spoken over a vast territory, extending from the River Ob to Kamchatka, and from the Arctic to Sinkiang. Of the utmost significance is the fact that various layers of Mongolian and Turkic languages have been deposited in these languages and have, in part, been conserved in forms which are no longer extant in their own groups. Through the study of Tungus languages it is likely that we shall arrive at a proto-language, as well as a better understanding of the nomadic culture of the steppes, not least with regard to the directions of migratory waves.

As far as Manchu in particular is concerned, its main value lies in its historical importance and its significance as an aid in understanding Chinese documents.

Although he was not the first to do so, for Klaproth had written in the same vein in 1824–8,⁶ Erich Hauer looked at the advantages of studying Manchu in an important article published in 1930, and numerous subsequent studies have highlighted the benefits to be gained from learning the language. The main points made by Hauer were that

even a limited knowledge of the language will guarantee the correct rendering of Manchu names and Manchu words occurring in Chinese texts;

that

The Manchu versions of names often reveal the true meaning of the names given and that

Every Manchu version of a Chinese text determines the grammatical function of the Chinese words.⁷

By way of illustration I propose to cite some examples, by no means exhaustive, bearing out these points. It is commonly believed, and Manchu names are frequently cited this way, that Manchus only possessed given names. Nurhaci and Dorgon, for example, both had the family name Aisin Gioro. Indeed, a large number of Manchu surnames are listed in the *Jakūn gūsai mukūn hala be uheri ejehe bithe* (Genealogy of the Manchu

5 See Gerhard Doerfer, «Classification problems of Tungus,» *Tungusica* I (1978), 3–6. The diagram is slightly amended.

6 See Stephen W. Durrant's paper «The controversy among Western Sinologists regarding the utility of Sino-Manchu translations,» presented to the Ch'ing Archives Symposium (Taipei, 1978), p. 13, f/n 12.

7 Erich Hauer, «Why the Sinologue should study Manchu,» *Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 61 (1930), 162–163.

Clans), published in 1735. As an example of the pitfalls into which this can lead, one can cite the many instances in Bland's *China under the Empress Dowager* where Manchus are given apparently Chinese names.⁸

As examples of the meanings of names, Hauer cited the cases of *T'ien-an men*, which instead of meaning «Gate of Heavenly Tranquility» in fact means «Gate of Heaven's Peace-making» (*abkai elhe obure duka*), and *Te-sheng men*, which does not mean «Gate of Victory of Virtue» but rather «Gate of Having Conquered by Virtue» (*erdemu-i etehe duka*).⁹ Nor have most of the Ch'ing reign names been correctly understood. Indeed, Edward Schafer, in his exchange with Mary Wright on the subject of reign names (*nien-hao*) in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, was correct – although for the wrong reason – in referring to the «remote connotations (which) would be hidden even from the most sophisticated Chinese reader.»¹⁰

Hauer's third point, on the grammatical preciseness of Manchu, as compared with Chinese, has been attested by those scholars, especially Haenisch, who have worked with parallel Manchu and Chinese texts.¹¹ Now that Manchu archives, and in particular, the Old Manchu Archives (*tongki fuka akū hergen i dangse*), the *Manju i yargiyan kooli* (*Man-chou shih-lu*) and the Manchu versions of the secret memorials (*tsou-che*), are more accessible, errors and omissions in the Chinese versions are turning up, revealing both misunderstandings of the Manchu and a lack of precision.

It should furthermore be obvious that the Manchu archives documenting the history of the Manchus during the period 1607–1636 are a primary source of the utmost importance to historians wishing to study the Ch'ing banner system, administration, internal struggles, etc. The Old Manchu Archives reveal, for example, that, contrary to Ch'ing records, Nurhaci did appoint a successor.¹²

8 On this subject, see Ch'en Chieh-hsien, «On the romanization of Manchu names in English works – a review based on newly found Manchu documents,» *Bulletin of the Institute of China Border Area Studies* 2 (July 1971), 19–42 and his «The Sinification of Manchu names: a study of personal names in the Ch'ing Imperial House and upper-class Manchu society of the Ch'ing Period,» in *Proceedings of the Second East Asian Altaistic Conference*, ed. Bang-han Kim (Seoul, 1969), pp. 26–34.

9 Hauer, «Why the Sinologue,» *JNCBRAS* 61 (1930), 162.

10 Letter to Editor, *Journal of Asian Studies* XVIII (1958/59), 432.

11 See, for example, Julius Grill, «Zur mandschurischen Übersetzung des *Tao-te-king*,» *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* LXV (1911), 759–770.

12 On this subject, see Ch'en Chieh-hsien, «The value of 'The Early Manchu Archives', in *Proceedings of the Third East Asian Altaistic Conference*, ed. Ch'en Chieh-hsien and Jagchid Sechen (Taipei, 1970), pp. 58–80.

There were in addition classes of archives which were never translated into Chinese (such as those dealing with local military and dependency affairs), despite the inroads made into the use of Manchu from early on in the Dynasty.¹³ Furthermore, Manchu was still being used in banner offices by Mongol and Tungus officials as late as 1931, as a collection of documents on the history of Bayantala League shows.¹⁴

Alternatively, documents were drafted in Manchu and translated into Chinese, where the Manchu version represented the authoritative source. This applied to most official documents dealing with banner/military affairs at a higher than local level (*siden-i bithe/kung-tu*), but especially to such rich sources as the archives relevant to the colonial wars (*bodogon-i bithe*).

Finally, there are a number of other important works, the Manchu version of which was the original. These include Tulišen's *I-yü-lu*¹⁵ and the Treaty of Nerchinsk.¹⁶

It should be readily apparent that many aspects of Ch'ing history can no longer be fully studied without recourse to Manchu sources, any more than studies of certain areas of Yüan history will be complete without knowledge of Mongolian records.

13 See Chieh-hsien Ch'en, «The decline of the Manchu language in China during the Ch'ing Period (1644–1911),» Paper at 17th Meeting of the Permanent International Altaistic Conference, Bonn, 1974.

14 See *Pa-yen-t'a-la-meng shih-tzu liao-chi-ch'eng* (Osaka, 1942). Erich Hauer has also examined a passport (actually, *laissez passer*) issued to an Oroch in 1927. See his «Ein Reisepass in Mandschusprache aus dem Jahre 1927,» *Mitteilungen des Seminars für Orientalische Sprachen*, Abt. 1, 32 (1929), 153–156.

15 See Imanishi Shunju, «Explanatory notes on Tulišen's *I-yü-lu*,» *Studia Serica* 9, 1 (1950), 5–10.

16 See W. Fuchs, «Der Russisch-Chinesische Vertrag von Nertschinsk vom Jahre 1689. Eine textkritische Betrachtung,» *Monumenta Serica* VI (1939/40), 546–593.