

# Review of *The Early Modern Travels of Manchu: A Script and Its Study in East Asia and Europe*, by Mårten Söderblom Saarela (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).

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The story of how Manchu studies in North America developed is well-trodden, and a necessarily simplistic summary—the kind recounted in historiography classes—goes something like this: in the beginning, there was Sinicization. However, following the opening of the archives and the discovery of Manchu-language archival documents, historians began to call this into question. In the years since, such Manchu-language state documents have been used to write primarily institutional histories, including studies of the development of Qing-specific institutions and explorations of the Qing's expansion into and management of borderlands and frontier areas. Today Manchu is understood to have been of particular interest to the Manchus themselves, and the language is viewed as both a window into the inner workings of the Qing and a key point of similarity between the Qing and other plurilingual early modern empires.

Yet, as *The Early Modern Travels of Manchu: A Script and Its Study in East Asia and Europe* beautifully demonstrates, other kinds of histories can be told using Manchu too. Mårten Söderblom Saarela takes as his subject how scholars on either side of Eurasia encountered, considered, and made sense of Manchu. Through this, Söderblom Saarela shows that Manchu mattered to scholars across East Asia and Europe and how such considerations manifested themselves on the pages of Manchu-language dictionaries, pedagogical materials, and linguistic texts. This meticulously researched book forges a new path in the cultural history of Manchu and represents an especially refreshing way to engage with Manchu-language dictionaries, treating them not as repositories of information but instead as concrete manifestations of near-simultaneous global explorations in philology—in other words, as objects with histories that are well worth uncovering. In addition to being a new take on the global nature of the Qing—with the emphasis here on the interconnectedness of intellectual circles and the global circulation of books

in the early modern period—this book unveils the history of concepts and tools that are today often taken as given, including the development of the Manchu script and the Manchu alphabet. These numerous contributions mean that *The Early Modern Travels of Manchu* is a necessary read for scholars of Manchu studies, in addition also to offering much to those interested in the history of science, the book, and the Qing.

The book moves chronologically and is divided into eight discrete chapters, each of which handles a specific moment, theme, or text. Chapter 1 (“To Follow Fuxi or Kubilai Khan? Written Manchu before 1644”) explores the long history of the creation of the Manchu script, situating the history of the script within both the development of other Inner Asian scripts such as ‘Phags-pa and Hangul as well as the state-building activities of the early Qing rulers. Through his analysis of how the creation of Manchu was told (and retold) across different texts, Söderblom Saarela effectively demonstrates that the now-standard story of the development of Manchu *is* indeed a narrative, one that was crafted, and which contains cracks and inconsistencies.

Chapter 2 (“The Beijing Origins of Manchu Language Pedagogy, 1668–1730”), Chapter 3 (“Phonology and Manchu in Southern China and Japan, c. 1670–1716”), and Chapter 6 (“The Manchu Script and Foreign Sounds from the Qing Court to Korea, 1720s–1770s”) all focus on how scholars across East Asia experimented with Manchu, thus deftly demonstrating Söderblom Saarela’s point that the language was of interest to many more than just the Manchus. Chapter 2 looks at the development of Manchu-language pedagogy, specifically focusing on how four Chinese scholars (Liu Dou, Liao Lunji, Shen Qiliang, and Wu-ge) engaged with the Manchu syllabary, eventually culminating in the expansion of the syllabary into a complete textbook that second-language learners could use to teach themselves the script. Chapter 3 extends this focus further afield, as a lack of alternative instruction methods and teachers led both Xiong Shibo in Jiangxi and Ogyū Sorai in Japan—each equipped with nothing more than a familiarity with phonological studies—to reorganize the Manchu syllabary into what was (to them) a useful grid. Such experiments are echoed in Chapter 6, where Söderblom Saarela shows how court-sponsored dictionaries initially designed to accurately capture the pronunciation of Manchu were later used by Chōson scholars seeking to perfect their Chinese.

The innovations discussed in these chapters are of course underpinned by the ubiquity of woodblock printing (xylography) across East Asia, something that can also be seen in Chapter 4 (“Manchu Words and Alphabetical Order in China and Japan, 1683–1820s”). This chapter looks at the development of other tools, specifically dictionaries, to handle Manchu, focusing on Shen Qiliang’s innovations and then the texts produced by Takahashi Kageyasu and his collaborators in Japan. In both cases there is a clear demonstration of the interplay between manuscript and print, as well as an emphasis on how necessary the increased circulation of books containing linguistic knowledge was to the spread of Manchu across East Asia.

Three further chapters highlight Manchu's movements across Europe. Chapter 5 ("Leibniz's Dream of a Manchu Encyclopaedia and Kangxi's Mirror, 1673–1708") presents two ultimately unsuccessful visions of the *Mirror of the Manchu Language* (*Han-i araha manju gisun-i buleku bithe*), with Gottfried Leibniz conceiving of it as a potential way to access knowledge about China and the Kangxi Emperor seeking to use the project to anchor Manchu's place as its own language. A story with a more successful ending takes place across Chapters 7 and 8. Chapter 7 ("The Invention of a Manchu Alphabet in Saint Petersburg, 1720s–1730s") examines how the Manchu syllabary was deciphered by European scholars, showing how several rounds of analysis, numerous attempts at grids, and often largely serendipitous acquisitions of Manchu-language books eventually resulted in the development of an alphabet. Chapter 8 ("The Making of a Modern Typeface in Paris, 1780s–1810s") finishes this story off with Louis-Mathieu Langelès, who made the alphabet concrete by casting it into movable Manchu type and successfully printing a Manchu-French dictionary.

As these summaries indicate, each chapter of *The Early Modern Travels of Manchu* can be read (or assigned) on its own. Reading the book cover to cover, though, rewards readers with a series of layered themes. One of the most recurring is how different scholars used the frameworks and tools at their disposal—ranging from Chinese philology to Dutch dictionaries—to make sense of Manchu, in turn folding the script into different intellectual projects and inscribing it with different meanings. In Chapter 1 Manchu appears in its most familiar guise, as an empire-building tool, but elsewhere scholars used it for different ends, including as a means to translate letters from Russia (Chapter 4), a literary language (Chapter 5), a way to access Chinese (Chapter 6), a puzzle to decipher with far-flung colleagues (Chapter 7), and, when in the form of punches and matrices, as something that can be exchanged for valuable books (Chapter 8). There is a strong technological thread running throughout the book as well, as the needs of book and print technologies are shown to have repeatedly dictated the solutions and explanations arrived at by Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and European scholars. This comes through most clearly in Chapter 8, where Söderblom Saarela shows how the needs and limitations of movable-type technology informed the final metal realization of the script.

The only disappointment of *The Early Modern Travels of Manchu* is a minor one: it ends. Given the loose case-study format of the book, it is easy to imagine how this book might have been expanded to include how Manchu traveled later in the nineteenth century, perhaps even stretching to its voyage to the United States. That part of Manchu's journey, between the creation of the Manchu alphabet and contemporary interest in it, remains unwritten. What this book does provide, however, is a roadmap for what such a study might look like, as well as an indication of the value of the stories that might be unearthed along the way.

