Review of *The Manchu Language at Court and in the Bureaucracy under the Qianlong Emperor*, by Mårten Söderblom Saarela

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Did the popularity of the Manchu language really decrease throughout the course of the Qing? To debunk the myth of Manchu decline, one could most conveniently offer new statistical evidence or question what has already been advanced. For example, the loss of imperial archives led to the impossibility of determining the true proportion of Manchu documents among the whole. For Mårten Söderblom Saarela, such an analysis based on pure statistical evidence confuses the relationship between numbers and linguistic competence—or, worse, it mistakes the number of Manchu documents as a direct representation of Manchu language capacity at large. The equation between document numbers and linguistic capacity not only ignores the specific context in which the Manchu language was used, it further conceals the political significance of Manchu literacy within the bureaucratic system, which was carefully constructed and maintained by the imperial rulers (234–35). Hence, instead of relying on numbers, *The Manchu Language at Court and in the Bureaucracy under the Qianlong Emperor* (hereafter, *The Manchu Language at Court*) carefully examines the incentives for and the effects of using Manchu in bureaucratic contexts, while it also highlights how court scholarship on Manchu contributed to a much broader intellectual interest in language studies in the eighteenth century. Söderblom Saarela's second monograph surpasses a mere opposition to the Manchu decline narrative. The book reflects on the role of Manchu for different political and intellectual actors and offers a rich and deep reflection on the relationship between language, authority, and the Qing bureaucratic system.

Apart from the introduction and conclusion, the book consists of seven content chapters that can be put into three groups, altogether examining the Manchu language as both a tool for administration and a subject of scholarly research. The first two chapters introduce the history of Manchu and also highlight how Manchu went

through several reforms, while its usage was constantly under dispute until Qianlong's reign. Chapter One outlines Qianlong's endeavor to standardize the Manchu language by creating neologisms and by loosening the dependence of the language on Chinese. Continuing the discussion on Qianlong's intervention in linguistic affairs, the second chapter examines the effects of the Qianlong language reform, including inventing lexicographical terms, standardizing terminology, and consolidating grammatical rules.

The following three chapters investigate the application of Manchu in bureaucratic documents. The third chapter, "Linguistic Compartmentalization," probes the incentives for producing monolingual administrative documents under a plurilingual regime. Although the emperor to some extent envisioned Chinese and Manchu having different and complementary applications (79), the linguistic choice of reporting local matters in one language appeared to be more *ad hoc* than the Qianlong Emperor had expected (60–63). Söderblom Saarela shows that the language used for composing palace memorials depended on both local factors and the institutions responsible for the issue in the capital city (82, 93). Ideally, linguistic compartmentalization would promise directness and expediency in the communication between the emperor and local officials through the palace memorial system, whereas in fact the transmission of information, especially on the local level, still largely relied upon translation and/or interlingual mediation (99).

The tension between the ruler's vision of linguistic compartmentalization and the frequent practices of translation and transcription on the other end of the palace memorial system is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four. By closely analyzing the exchange between the emperor and high-ranking provincial officials, Söderblom Saarela shows that Manchu was not "a security language" only for the banners. Rather, the palace memorial system was designed to involve as few unranked clerks as possible. This chapter persuades the reader of the possibility that the emperor's criticisms of the linguistic mistakes in the memorials were not purely a result of his dissatisfaction with the officials' Manchu capacity *per se*. Instead, Qianlong was more likely criticizing bannerman officials' reliance on secretaries to compose their letters (112). Therefore, the conflict between the emperor and the memorials over matters of language is essentially about work ethics and administrative procedures.

In this sense, language errors could be political, so long as the emperor kept mobilizing the linguistic standard. These linguistic mistakes, inappropriate expressions, and Qianlong's corrections are extensively analyzed in Chapter Five. Söderblom Saarela goes through the emperor's notes on the memorials as well as his responses in the court letters, and he shows that what Qianlong took to be inappropriate or wrong might not always have been so for everyday users. These errors were less serious than Qianlong made them seem to be, as phonetic variations, sound change, or language contact are natural processes that happened in Manchu as well as in other languages used at

court (146). In the end, this chapter concludes that Qianlong's linguistic standard is idiosyncratic and does not always correspond to the nature of an everyday vernacular. Using Qianlong's criticisms as evidence of the decline in the bannermen's Manchu capacity is, therefore, unsound (155–56).

The final two chapters shift the focus from the emperor as the master of language to the emperor as a major patron of Manchu language studies. Both chapters place the philology of Manchu sources within the trend of evidential learning, characterized by its pursuit of ancient authority and reliance on textual evidence. The bilateral gloss between old Manchu and Classical Chinese exemplifies the plurilingual logic of compiling reference books during Qianlong's reign (163, 167). For example, the *Book of Characters Without Dots and Circles* was modeled from Xu Shen's *Shuowen jiezi,* offering a structural explanation of features of Manchu spelling that resembled Xu's methodology. Similarly, the *Book of Old Manchu Phrases Lifted from the Veritable Records*, despite being monolingual in Manchu, aimed to gloss the *Veritable Records* written in old Manchu using contemporary Manchu in the eighteenth century (174–83). As Söderblom Saarela shows, glosses that appeared in such reference books pay less attention to categorizing linguistic features. Instead, the study of the old phrases of Manchu, together with the re-editing of the old Manchu archive, was more about recovering the historical truth embedded in the pre-conquest archive and historiography through understanding its compositional language (189). Hence, with Chinese, Mongolian, and Tibetan texts mobilized as sources and methods to elucidate the meanings of the old Manchu, re-editing the pre-conquest archive simultaneously initiates a plurilingual philological scholarship.

Continuing the discussion of the re-editing of the old Manchu archive and the production of plurilingual glossaries, the last chapter furthers the author's analysis of Inner Asian philology and its relationship to evidential learning. In this chapter, the author compares the re-editing of the pre-conquest archive with the compilation of glossaries of the three histories of Liao, Jin, and Yuan. Söderblom Saarela argues that both projects share the same fundamental goal, that is, to recover the meaning of historical texts by examining the language in which they were written. The most noticeable difference between them, however, is that the old Manchu archive was not printed or circulated in public, while the three histories were composed and widely reproduced in Chinese (224). Taking both cases into consideration, Söderblom Saarela observes that the Qianlong court also significantly contributed to—while it also constrained—the flourishing of evidential learning in the latter half of the eighteenth century through its practices and works of plurilingual and multilingual philology.

In conclusion, *The Manchu Language at Court* generates a rich discussion on the relationship between language and power, echoing the increasing scholarly interest in the politics of language in the Qing empire. Building on the first generation of historians

of the New Qing History, recent research on the languages of the Qing empire is challenging the assumption that the language used for documentation must be an objective reflection of the general linguistic situation all at once.[1] As Söderblom Saarela points out in the Conclusion, "Language certainly changes along with its environment, but just as the transformation of that environment was not beyond human agency, nor was language" (241). *The Manchu Language at Court* exemplifies a thorough analysis of the context in which language policies took shape and the political nature of linguistic choices in a plurilingual empire. It therefore merits a readership that extends beyond Qing history, encompassing book history and the history of language.

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1. In addition to Söderblom Saarela's work, see also Jiani He, *Ruling the Mongols of Manchuria* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2025), 42–46.