

# Some thoughts on *Onomastica Manjurica*: strange or amusing names in Manchu

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## Abstract

The main goal of this paper is to put forward the hypothesis that (Dynastic) Manchu depreciating names may be relics of a well-known Tungusic(-Eurasian) naming custom. It is a common practice among many Eurasian societies to name children with derogatory terms aiming at averting evil influences or bad luck on them.

**Keywords:** Manchu; derogatory names.

**Resumen.** *Algunas ideas sobre Onomastica Manjurica: nombres extraños o graciosos en manchú*

El objetivo principal de este artículo es proponer la hipótesis de que los nombres despectivos en manchú (dinástico) podrían ser vestigios de una conocida tradición onomástica tunguso(-euroasiática). Es una práctica común entre diversas sociedades eurasiáticas poner nombre a los niños con términos despectivos con el fin de evitarles malas influencias o mala suerte.

**Palabras clave:** manchú; nombres derogatorios.

贱名长命 *jiàn míng cháng mìng* ‘mean name, long life’

Chinese common saying

1. In his excellent edition of the “Clan genealogies of the Manchu Eight Banners” (*Jakûn gûsai Manjusai mukûn hala be uheri ejehe bithe* / 八旗满洲氏族通谱 *bāqí mǎnzhōu shízù tōng pǔ*), work completed originally in 1745, Stary comments that the most interesting type of names involves appellatives such as *Wakšan* ‘toad’, *Giohoto* ‘beggar’, *Walda* ‘vile’ or even *Ehenikan* / *Ahanikan* ‘B[a]d or Slavish Chinese’. In Stary’s words, “[i]ndeed, it is difficult to understand, according to our

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mentality, how a father could call his son [like that]. [...] some criteria in Manchu name giving [...] are still unknown” (STARY 1999: 246; 2000: xii).<sup>1</sup> The main goal of this brief paper, which for some may look somewhat trivial, is to put into the knowledge of specialists working in the field of Manchu philology and ethnology that there are no strange or amusing names here, but just the remnant of a tradition, indeed still very alive around the world, which, among other things, culturally connects the Manchu with the rest of Tungusic nations as well as other cultures of the (Northern) Eurasian region.<sup>2</sup>

2. As Stary has already commented, our knowledge about naming customs among the Manchu is scarce at best. There is however a couple of points on which different reports seem to agree. SHIROKOGOROFF (1924: 119-20), who had the chance to work with the last genuine Manchu, has explained that the name to newborns was given after one year. If there was no traditional name, they gave a name to the child in order for him to be strong, e.g. *sele* ‘iron’, *wehe* ‘stone’, etc. Otherwise, they named him according to the thing the mother saw in the very first moment of delivering, like for example ‘wardrobe’ or ‘table’. The latter sort of names, in Shirokogoroff’s opinion, was given “[...] without any significance”. This fits commentaries by other authors; for instance CH’EN (1968: 28) adds that names “[...] were freely chosen by parents on the basis of a strong liking for a particular thing, or even because of mother’s dreams during pregnancy”. He also comments that his Manchu teacher once confessed to him that “[...] even after the Revolution of 1911, the same practice continued to exist in his native district in Ili” (*ibid.* ft. 17). From these descriptions (many more could be added along the same lines) one can only conclude that even for the Manchu the custom of naming children with “strange or amusing” appellatives lacked already an explanation.

1. The label “strange or amusing” is taken from the classification of (proper) names elaborated by the Chinese scholar 陳捷先 Ch’en Chieh-hsien (= Chén Jiéxiān) in a series of papers (CH’EN 1968: 29, see also 1971). Unfortunately, Ch’en does not elaborate on possible explanations as for the origin of this kind of names, so it is safe to conclude that at best Ch’en agrees with Stary’s remark on the oddity of such elections to call one’s offspring. Although ELLIOTT (2001: 241-46) devotes some pages to the matter, he does not pronounce any opinion at this respect, his presentation being basically of informative nature (see additionally TOH 2005: 14-38).
2. If I say trivial is because this fact may have been under consideration by some scholars for some time, though they seemingly never considered appropriate to elaborate further. Thus, STARY (2006a: 293) comments that “[...] the meanings of these names are, in almost all cases, hard to decipher and show an earlier ‘Tungus’ (but also Mongolian and Tibetan) substratum, which with the help of the dictionaries today available are not understandable”. Stary does not explain what that substratum is or why he writes Tungus[ic] with upper commas. In a very similar line of thought, some Chinese scholars have proposed on different occasions that the name of the founder of the Qing dynasty, *Nurgaci* ~ *Nurhaci*, might mean ‘skin of a wild boar’, connecting it with name-giving practices among the Tungusic peoples. Unfortunately, as TAK-SING (1999: 144 ft. 28) points out, in spite of deserving much more attention, this hypothesis is generally rejected by scholars in the field, due in part to the lack of a deep insight on the matter.

3. The key to this mysterious custom may be hidden in both the Tungusic as well as, surprisingly enough, Chinese background of the Manchu culture.<sup>3</sup> Generally speaking, many of the Manchu traditions known to us still preserve much of their original Tungusic spirit. I say somewhat because the particularities of the given name-giving custom are not alien to the Chinese.

It is nothing of a speculation that Manchu culture was in the past (= pre-Jurchen times) very rich in animistic and shamanic conceptions. This can be deduced from the relics laboriously unearthed by Chinese ethnologists working on the last remnants of (Heilongjiang) Manchu and Sibe shamanism. Evidences are also plenty as for the survival of certain ceremonies during the dynastic period. Is in connection with these shamanistic beliefs that one may find a link between those amusing and strange Manchu names and the Tungusic cultural substratum, for there are numerous cultures, far away from each other in space and time, which hold the belief that in order to avoid the influence of bad spirits is common practice to call newborns with uncommon, even disgusting, names. Few years after their birth or already as teenagers, they usually receive a common name, more in accordance with Western tastes.<sup>4</sup>

The main goal of this practice is, as it can be naturally deduced, to avoid contacts with evil spirits, in whichever fashion the contact may happen to take place (truly evil spirits, evil eye, etc.). Knowing its name, evil spirits might call and infect the newborn with illnesses or just produce its instant death.<sup>5</sup> The rationale

3. Curiously enough, as STARY (2006a) has already showed, there is a continuity “Tungusic > Manchu” at least in the tradition of binominal names: this being a common practice among Tungusic peoples (cf. the very famous “Dersu Uzala” case, where the pattern “name + family name [= clan name]” can be easily discerned; for a tentative linguistic identification of this enigmatic figure, see TSUMAGARI 2003), binominal names are only found in the initial period of Manchu history. They were progressively vanishing at latter stages, being absent altogether from Sibe (and practically from Spoken Manchu, for that matter). Here by “continuity” I mean the expected disappearance of Tungusic (“savage”?) cultural traits under the pressing influence of Chinese (“refined”?) customs. A direct consequence of the undergone erosion is perhaps the etymological opacity of many of those binominal names. In fact, in instances such as *Ahana Wejige*, *Cuku Budan*, *Giyamaka Šojugū*, *Korka Gohei*, *Nandu Haktu* or *Soo Tumbulu*, we are unable to establish the meaning of one or another component (STARY 2006b: 297-303). Regrettably, there is no time nor space here to elaborate further on this issue, but some of those names could have Tungusic etymologies (as is the case for many other names, whose Tungusic, Mongolic and Tibetan origin is, if not transparent, at least recoverable without much speculation).
4. This is a well known anthropological fact, so I will dwell neither in its ethnolinguistic origins nor in the exposition of contemporary theories, since that isn’t the goal of this paper. It suffices to address the interested reader to basic references such as FRAZER (1922: 244-62) or ZELENIN (1929-1930, esp. 1930: 118-140), where the taboo name issue is discussed at large with further specialized literature, including Turkic and Tungusic position, referring mainly to Yakuts and the Nanay, respectively (the Nivkh, another Amurian ethnolinguistic group like the Nanay, are also frequently mentioned on this respect; it is worth noting that from a linguistic point of view, the Manchuric languages, i.e. Jurchen, Manchu, Sibe, &c., are very close to the Amurian Tungusic group). See more generally TUGOLUKOV (1980).
5. Conversely, it is possible to find names whose aim is to bring the privileges of a specific good quality upon its bearer, for instance if a Nanay mother desires her child to be strong, she would name him *Manca* (ZELENIN 1930: 120), a word related to *masi* and *manga*, both meaning ‘strong, hard, tough’.

(according to the reductionist or historicist school of religious studies) behind it is tied to the concept of child dead, a very common disgrace among pre-industrial societies.<sup>6</sup> This is commonly referred to as the apotropaic function of names (from Greek ἀποτρόπαιος ‘averting evil’), by which they “[...] have the power to avert evil influences or bad luck[, and] make the bearers of such names undesirable to evil spirits” (KALUZYŃSKA 2004: 141-142).<sup>7</sup>

**4.1.** The Chinese, as well as other surrounding ethnic groups of Eurasia, including the Tungusic, are known to have been performing this practice. For the sake of illustration, one very well-known case may be found among the Ainu of Northern Japan, in the east extreme of the traditional Eurasian continent. FUJIMURA (1999: 270) says that “[t]he new baby was called by a temporary name, often a repulsive one, and a permanent name was not given until the age of seven or eight”. OHNUKI-TIERNEY (1974: 57-8), discussing Sakhalin Ainu materials, explains: “one of the most serious concerns about infants is sickness, much of which is believed to be caused by evil spirits. The Ainu take various kinds of precautions, which are directed toward the exorcism of evil spirits. *Pon tenneho*, the term for ‘infant’, itself embodies this concern. Meaning ‘a small wet (with urine) child,’ the term is used to discourage the approach of demons”.<sup>8</sup> Ohnuky-Tierney makes clear that those names used in avoiding the pernicious influence of evil spirits could stay with the person forever. Thus, a very famous singer-narrator was called *Cohconke*, the belt covering the male genitals, and another man *Osomaruype*, lit. ‘bowel-mover’. It seems that he used to dirty his pants when small and, for his own protection, the evil spirits were informed of it.<sup>9</sup>

6. The connection with shamanism is only natural, although not compulsory, for this naming custom is also attested in non-shamanic cultures. It happens that Tungusic is the *locus classicus* of shamanism, but in this context, it seems to be just a coincidence perhaps of no relevance to the issue. Although briefly, PRATT (2007: 318) gives an accurate definition of what the naming ceremony is meant to be among shamanic societies.
7. The very same reason has been correctly invoked to explain the so-called “depreciating names” in the Chinese naming ritual, e.g. 丑鬼 *chòugui* ‘ugly monster’ (KALUZYŃSKA 2008: 61). However, this kind of names is given to children, i.e. these are typical names of the childhood, in latter stages lost in favor of other, more suitable to the adulthood, names. One has to bear in mind this detail before advancing an explanation to account for the names recorded in Manchu sources, all of them belonging apparently to adults.
8. The practice of invective, i.e. the use of words referring to sexual organs, feces, ancestors, death, and poverty, connected with exorcism and the banishment of evil spirits, was also very popular among the Ainu and it can be profusely observed in oral literature, where many (positive) characters use it as a rhetorical device when they are in the presence of evil spirits and the like. Regrettably, monographic studies such as the one conducted by the late 知里真志保 CHIRI MASHIHO (1973) are missing in other fields within the Eurasian territory, and therefore we cannot claim that there exists an unambiguous correlation between the name-giving practice discussed in this paper and invectiveness, no matter how self-evident may it appear.
9. Instances could be easily enumerated, especially from the fields of Tibetan and Mongolian studies, among which this practice is very well-known. However, since I cannot claim competence on those, therefore I shall not mention them. However, it is undeniable that the combined action of Tibetan and Mongolian may have been the origin of the Tungusic custom, as the result of very prolonged and intense periods of linguistic and cultural contact. For basic and up-to-date references

Numerous and explicit statements about this practice among the different Tungusic ethnolinguistic groups could be easily quoted from specialist literature.<sup>10</sup> It suffices to bring into the picture the Ewenki testimony of VASILEVIČ (1969: 171): “there were different methods to protect children’s health. Thus, in order to put an end to the illness ([that is,] to deceive the evil spirit of the illness), a terrible name was momentarily given to the mourner, one that the evil spirit would find disgusting (sometimes the name of an amphibian or insect)”.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, in connection to the custom mentioned above by Širokogoroff, it should be surprising to no one to find such Ewenki (Birare, Nerčín) personal names as <aakan> (= *aakan* ‘birch bark vessel, basket’), <bolokoi> (from *boloko* ‘pipe-stem’), <cucuvul> (from *cucun* ‘serrated iron scrapper with a handle for furs’), <saŋyūni> (related to *sanggir* ‘notch’), or <sogdavul> (related to *sogdondo* ‘back, rear, spine’) in lexicographic repertoires (DOERFER 2004: [4, 1474, 2209, 9435, 9859], respectively).<sup>12</sup>

**4.2.** The situation found by Manchu scholars, i.e. one of astonishment for being unable to insert this sort of name-giving practices within the (dynastic) Manchu common customs, actually reminds the one described more than a decade ago in the field of Aleut studies. In his excellent treatise on Aleut names, BERGLAND (1998: 58-64) expressed his dismay, as Stary would do several years after him, on the impossibility to describe Aleut naming customs in more accurate terms. As in the Manchu case, some details have come to us from different authors, and although one seems to corroborate what the other says, the information is still very basic. Carl Heinrich Merck, already at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> c., noted that “[...] the name is given the newborn by the most experienced [men] of a settlement, after what comes first to their mind, such as birds, sea animals and the like” (BERGLAND 1998: 58). This and Širokogoroff’s remarks are very similar. In addition to family, lineage names, it was very common that every one would have a nickname, “[...] depicting a characteristic feature of the person, for instance, his gait, disease, or his boldness” (*ibid.* 60). Ioann Veniaminov, the Russian missionary who would stay among Aleuts and develop different linguistic tools for the easiness of religious instruction,

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on name-giving customs in Middle Mongolian and beyond, see RYBATZKI (2012). In the field of Turkic studies, RÁSONYI (1976) introduced the concepts of “fortuitous names (omen names)” and “protective names” which correspond to the amusing and strange ones in the Manchu tradition.

10. I do not know how to evaluate the absence of such a custom among the Jurchen and the Sibe, i.e. diachronically speaking, the past and present of the historical, classical ethnic Manchus (still represented by a very small minority in Heilongjiang), respectively. In the former case it is much more expectable than in the latter, since we lack a lot of information on Jurchen cultural traits in general. The Sibe, however, preserve many shamanic traditions, clearly pointing to Tungusic common inheritance. Unfortunately, the custom of giving “amusing” names is not common among them, as far as I can tell.
11. “Для охраны здоровья ребенка существовал ряд оберегов. Так, чтобы прекратить болезнь (обмануть духа болезни), болящему временно давали страшное имя, неприятное для духа (чаще названия земноводных и насекомых)” (author’s translation).
12. For a complete list of Ewenki personal names in Širokogoroff’s dictionary, see KNÜPPEL (2004: 108-111). The suffix *-wul*, attached to personal names, is extremely well represented and documented: it appears in all Ewenki dialects during the three centuries of historical documentation available for this language, including oral literary registers (for further details, *vid. i.a.* VASILEVIČ 1974: 299-300).

explains that the nickname could be inherited in some cases (as happened among the Ainu). In fact, some of the names gathered in the official Russian census of the Billings Expedition (1790-1792) can only be identified as nicknames,<sup>13</sup> e.g. *Sikanax̂* ‘toothless’, *Ichaquun* ‘his own anus’, *Chngatux̂* ‘sea otter’, *Malga aḡadaḡ* ‘his puff (odor) appears’, *Aligayax̂* ‘trying to make vomit’, *Chuug(a)yuux̂* ‘poor fur parka’, *Ulasix̂* ‘tent’, *Unghlux̂* ‘pinnacle’, or even *Asaḡix̂* ‘has a name’.<sup>14</sup>

It is undeniable that not only this cultural pattern, but also the state of affairs which the researcher must face, resembles very much the one found in classical Manchu sources. This may be nothing else but the confirmation that after contacts with dominating alien cultures, name-giving customs tend to disappear very quickly. It is more than likely that by the time the Jurchen, first, and later the Manchu, begun to leave written records, much of their traditional, perhaps still Tungusic, way of life was already a vanishing reality.

**5.1.** All in all, far from strange or amusing, the name-giving custom briefly described above was the only strategy among certain societies to avoid the influence of evil spirits. Therefore, in response to Stary’s previous statement, it is pretty normal that a father could call his son, say ‘diaper’, if by that he could protect him or even save his life. It goes without saying that from a Westerner’s viewpoint most of those names are, to say the least, odd. However, once they are inserted in a more traditionalistic framework, there is no surprise about their origins and especially about the fact that even grown men could retain such a name as ‘diaper’.<sup>15</sup>

**5.2.** At this juncture it is crucial to underline that Chinese influence cannot play here any role regarding the origin of such a practice among the Manchu. Methodological improper as it may seem, this was a common procedure among some researchers, e.g. Shirokogoroff.<sup>16</sup> For one thing, the presence of this name-giving custom is, as

13. Aleut orthographic conventions: <ng> = /ŋ/, <g> = /ɣ/, <ḡ> = /ʀ/, <ḡ̂> = /x/, <ch> = /č/.

14. Among the Eskimo, cousins of the Aleut, naming customs are better known. As for nicknames, they could have plenty of them, but seemingly not more eloquent than those found in Aleut. BALICKI (1989[1970]: 200) tells us of a Netsilik woman who was called successively “1) pack ice; 2) the little one whose feet are cut; 3) leister; 4) butterfly; 5) the one who is partial to woman’s genitals; 6) the little one with the bib; 7) the one who has been beaten with a piece of wood; 8) the one who has just shit; 9) the round one; 10) the admirable one; 11) the course stitch; 12) the unlucky one”.

15. One wonders whether it is not possible that the name of the second Manchu emperor, commonly referred in Western literature as Abahai (whose only personal name was Hong Taiji, or perhaps better Hong Tayiji, as argued in TAK-SING 1999: 137-141), was *Haihūn* ‘otter’, as it has been recently proposed after a passage in a Korean source of 1626. STARY (2006b) expresses his doubts on this issue. He correctly points that the Chinese characters allegedly transcribing *Haihūn* (in the given document: 黑還 *hēihuán*) are nothing else but an attempt at rendering the well know Chinese-based title-name *Hong* (~ ṡHūng) *Taiji* (cf. 皇太子 *huáng tàizǐ* ‘crown prince’). Whatever true or not, it seems to me that STARY’s (2006b: 118-9) last argument, “[...] the name Hong Taiji should have sounded better to (not only) Manchu ears and especially afterwards than *Haihūn*” may be taken now with a bit more of caution. In fact, Stary admits that *Haihūn* already existed as a personal name. On an etymological proposal for the name *Nurgaci* ~ *Nurhaci* involving Tungusic (cultural) background, see ft. 2 in the present paper.

16. See a very illustrative instance, one of many, in LOPATIN (1960: 58-59).

we have briefly seen above, present across Eurasia, including Tungusic territories. Needless to say, the scenario in which Chinese exported this cultural trait to the rest of the Eurasian continent, Tibetan and Ainu customs being a direct result of it, cannot be rejected.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, one may speculate that it was preserved in Manchu and Chinese at the same time, the reason of its progressive loss being the increasing rejection of shamanic/ animistic beliefs more proper of the Tungusic tribes, and not of the refined (Sinified) Manchu.<sup>18</sup> We know that already by the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> c. those names could be annoying or derogatory. CH'EN (1968: 33) tells of a practice applied to officials as well as imperial clansmen by the 乾隆 Ch'ien lung (= Qiánlóng, 1711-1799) emperor, who once disgraced a Manchu official by renaming him 俘習渾 *fúxíhún*, the Chinese transcription for Manchu *fusihun* 'base, mean'. It is obvious that according to the refined Chinese etiquette, such names are improper. However, it is necessary to keep in mind that strange or amusing names are more and more infrequent in sources from the 18<sup>th</sup> c. onwards. An additional factor to take into account is the increasing preference for names that incorporated Chinese characters with propitious meanings, or even names that sounded Chinese (Mark Elliot, p.c.).

6. Could there be any other additional reason why the Manchu would abandon this well known cultural pattern among Eurasian societies? I think we should take into account too the very nature of the Tungusic-Manchu relationships. Generally speaking, the Manchu had no contact of any sort with other Tungusic ethnic groups such as the Nanay or the Ewenki, who remained in the sphere of the Mongolian empire. Therefore contact situations were somehow restricted and geopolitically conditioned.<sup>19</sup>

One wonders whether something like the "Ugric-Turkic Battle" (*Az ugor-török háború*) in the domain of Hungarian philology and ethnohistory may have been a reality also in the case of Manchu. After the publication of a long paper by Á. Vámbéry on Hungarian-"Turkish-Tatar" lexical similarities in 1869, Hungarian scholars assumed that their origins were to be found among the Turkic societies, i.e. culturally refined ones and with a very long history of victory and dominance, and not with the Uralic peoples, most of them fishermen and villagers in the cold and depressing lands of Siberia. Hungarian scholars used the many hundred Turkic loanwords present in the Hungarian language to support their assumptions. It took a great deal of work to unmask this academic "misunderstanding" (*vid. i.a.* RÓNA-TAS

17. KALUZYŃSKA (2004: 135-6; 2008) explains that this name-giving custom existed already in the Zhou dynasty (1050-249 BC). In spite of its ongoing, current nature, scholars already from the Song dynasty (960-1279) admitted that such a practice was characteristic of the ancient people. From a purely academic point of view, the interpretation of these names was also a mystery among Chinese specialists until very recently.
18. See basic descriptions of the Ewenki, Manchu, Oroqen, and Sibe shamanhoods in WALTER-FRIDMAN 2004(II): 551-557, 582-586, 597-601 and 615-618, respectively.
19. It is possible to distinguish at least the following contact scenarios: Manchu-Solon, Manchu-Oroqen, Manchu-Udihe, and Manchu-Nanai. Each of them may be best characterized only by lexicon and phonological features, for we lack a systematic study on the mutual structural (= morphosyntactical) influences.



1988: 751-757 for linguistic materials and PEYRÓ GARCÍA 2001 for the ideological factors). It seems to me that it would be far-fetched to propose the existence of a “Chinese-Manchu battle” in this case, for Manchu specialists never denied the genealogical tie between Manchu and the rest of Tungusic ethnic groups (hunters and fishermen as the Uralic peoples are) or, put another way, they have never claimed Chinese origins for the Manchu. Notwithstanding this, a classicist viewpoint related to the refined culture imposed by the Chinese, however, cannot be ruled out as an explanation to account for the systematic silence, if not rejection, of the Tungusic shamanic elements among the royal Manchu.

7. Thus, it is my understanding that the “Clan genealogies of the Manchu Eight Banners” and similar, contemporary sources just witness the precarious state of a former Tungusic(-Eurasian) custom. We cannot but agree with BERGSLAND (1958: 64), when he asserts that “[...] naming customs probably ha[ve] a long history behind them, like cultural phenomena in general”. It is just too bad we do not know the whole story.

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