

The Manchu script reform of 1632: New data and new questions

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Judging from almost all traditional Western and Asian sources, the question concerning the creation and successive reform of the Manchu script has already found an apparently definitive answer. According to these sources, the Manchu script was created in 1599 by Erdeni *baksi* and Gagai *zarguci*, who, realising the suggestion of Nurhaci, simply adopted the Mongolian alphabet to correspond to the requirements of the Manchu language. It is also maintained that a reform of this old and inadequate script was carried out in 1632 by Dahai, who introduced the diacritic marks, «dots» and «circles», and invented «in addition a few new signs for the representation of unusual Chinese sounds».¹ This we read, for example, in Dahai's biography published in Hummel's *Eminent Chinese*,² and this has been generally accepted by historiographers writing about the Manchu script reform.

As I shall try to show below, these statements are rather questionable, and the whole history of the Manchu script reform, as well as of its alleged only «reformer» Dahai, must be rewritten, leaving some questions without an answer because of the lack of sources.

First of all: what do we know about Dahai himself, the man who died in 1632 (at the age of 38), the year of the reform? His life is still far from being known in all its details. The puzzles begin already with Dahai's birthplace and his supposed clan name. In the biography of Dahai in Hummel's *Eminent Chinese* we find that he originated from «Giolca, home of Desiku, the granduncle of Nurhaci» (Hummel 1991.213). This indicates a settlement correctly named Giorca 覺爾察, which, according to Dahai's biography in the *Baqi tong zhi* 八旗通志 (53243) was «a geographical name from which his clan-name originated» (*yi di wei xing* 以地為姓). It is interesting to note that «Giorca» does not exist as a Manchu clan name. It is mentioned neither in the list of clans in the encyclopaedia *Qing chao tongzhi* 清朝通志 (chapters 2–5), nor in the «Genealogical Registers of the Manchu Eight Banners» *Baqi Manzhou shizu tongpu* 八旗滿洲氏族通譜, though Dahai belonged to the Manchu Plain Blue Banner. It is therefore a paradox that he, the official reformer

of the Manchu script, is not mentioned in the Manchu clan registers, where altogether 14 different Dahais are found.

In this situation, a doubt has arisen that Dahai may not at all have been a Manchu, but a manchurised Chinese who, according to some Chinese scholars, «was a Chinese schoolboy captured one day on his way home from school».³ Moreover, one may ask how it could have been possible that a Manchu boy who lived in a Manchu environment and started his Chinese studies only «at the age of 9» (*uyun seci nikan bithe tacifi*), i.e., from 1602 onwards, could have become so quickly well versed in Chinese letters. According to the notes of Korean war prisoners at Nurhaci's court, even in 1619 the Chinese language was not practised among the local people of Manchuria, and the help of Chinese and Korean deserters or prisoners was needed in addition to Dahai's services.⁴

Dahai was in the service of Nurhaci as an official interpreter, and he was one of the first translators of Chinese works into Manchu. As mentioned above, he is traditionally considered to be the only reformer of the Manchu script, but this consideration becomes more complicated with the discovery of two other entries in Chinese documents. One is from the «Genealogical Registers of the Manchu Eight Banners», which was found by Giovanni Stary and reported by him in 1992 at a conference in China. There, on page 11b of the 23rd chapter, is a reference to a certain Kara 喀喇 from the Nara clan of Ula 烏喇地方納喇氏, who belonged to the White Banner. Furthermore, it is written that «By an imperial order Kara created the Manchu script and was rewarded with a title of *baksi*» (*Kara be hese be dahame fukjin manju bithe banjibume araha seme baksi gebu šangnafi*).

The other information is found in the «Veritable records of Taizong» *Taizong shilu* 太宗實錄, where on a date corresponding to November 11, 1633,⁵ which is more than one year after Dahai's death, it is written: 巴克什庫爾纏所增朕恐終有未合 (*bakeshi Kuerchan suo zeng, zhen kong zhong you wei he*) «the additions made by *baksi* Kûrcan, we fear that they are not yet adequate».⁶

Unfortunately we do not have any document clarifying Kara's and Kûrcan's role in the whole history of the Manchu script reform. Even in Kûrcan's biography nothing is said about this matter, we only read that «Kûrcan and Dahai studied Chinese literature and *instructed all of the people*; for our country they achieved good merits, and the title of *baksi* was bestowed upon them».⁷ Could the expression that they «instructed all of the people (*xunhui zhu ren* 訓誨諸人) refer also to their activity as Manchu script reformers?

These new additions to the well known statement about Dahai allow us to suppose that the script reform was carried out by an Imperial

commission whose members, for reasons not yet known, are not listed in any of the available documents, and of whom we have only scattered information.

The second question arises about the year 1632 as the date in which Dahai is usually reported to have reformed the old Manchu script by adding diacritic marks. It can now be easily seen from Manchu (but not Chinese) documents that this statement is wrong. We may refer to the documents available in the *Jiu Manzhou dang*,⁸ which cover the period from 1607 until 1637. Diacritic marks are actually found in documents from about 1625 onwards, but, on the other hand, there are also documents dated after 1632 which are still written in the old orthography without dots and circles.

In 1969 the Russian historian Irina T. Moroz suggested three periods in the development of the Manchu script: I. from 1599 until ?; II. from ? until 1632; III. from 1632 until the beginning of the 20th century.⁹ This chronology replaces the conventional division into two periods: I. 1599–1632; II. after 1632. According to Moroz, the Manchu script of the first period was simply identical with the Mongolian script without any modifications. The second period is characterised by the occasional use of diacritical marks, while, finally, during the third period Dahai systematised the use of the diacritic marks. Moroz accepts the date of 1632 without discussion.

The latest work on this problem is written by the German scholar Carsten Näher, who underlines the fact that the «*tongki fuka akû hergen* (the script without dots and circles, T. P.) was still in use after 1632 and that different types of what later became the *tongki fuka sindaha hergen* (the script with added dots and circles, T. P.) were already in use before 1632».¹⁰ Speaking about the linguistic development of the Manchu language, Näher states: «Therefore, the year 1632 is of little importance for a periodization of the Manchu system of writing even if a periodization of written Manchu is based on the type of script which was in use for writing the language.» Another suggestion was given by the Chinese scholar Guan Kexiao. According to the results of his recent research, Dahai and his colleagues started their reform activity already in 1623.¹¹

So, what did Dahai really do in 1632? An answer is found in the same *Jiu Manzhou dang* on a date corresponding to April 24, 1632.¹² In the *original* entry we find the statement that «to read the orders in the normal language (*bai gisun*) according to their pronunciation is easy. But since mistakes are unavoidable (*tašarame ojirahû ofi*) in the case of personal and geographical names, by the order of the wise han of the Aisin

state in the spring moon of the sixth year, Dahai *baksi* added dots and circles». ¹³ From this passage we may assume that diacritic marks were absolutely necessary to avoid mistakes in transliteration and were added by Dahai only to *personal and geographical names* of, probably, non-Manchu origin.

As has been pointed out by Michael Weiers, ¹⁴ a *later* comment inserted in this document and written in the already reformed script states that Dahai «corrected the Manchu script by adding points and circles», ¹⁵ thus attributing to him the whole script reform. However, the original obituary on Dahai's death (who died between 13 and 15 o'clock on August 29, 1632) in the *Jiu Manzhou dang* does not mention the orthographic reform among his merits. The Manchu script reform, as a whole, is attributed to him only in the above-mentioned *later* comment to the *Jiu Manzhou dang*, and in his biography in the *Baqi tongzhi* ¹⁶ of the 18th century, where it is especially stressed that Dahai «added» (*zengtian* 增添) the dots and circles, invented special letters for Chinese sounds, and created special syllables according to the Chinese *qiefan* system. On Dahai's tombstone from the 9th year of Elhe Taifin (1670) it is even specified that he added «five syllables to render Chinese sounds» (*geli sunja uju de nikan i gisun de acabume manju bithei hergen nonggiha*). ¹⁷

It seems clear from this brief analysis that the Western accounts on the date and author of the Manchu script reform are based on rather late sources. The *original* Manchu documents going back to Dahai's lifetime, such as the *Jiu Manzhou dang*, do not mention him explicitly as the «creator» of the Manchu reformed script, but refer to his role as a reformator only as far as the orthography of personal and geographical names is concerned.

Conclusion

Many questions remain still open, and the history of the Manchu script reform is far from being definitely clear in all its aspects. As a provisional conclusion we may, nevertheless, point out the following:

1. The Manchu script reform was not realised in 1632, but was a rather long process covering approximately a dozen years.
2. The reform was carried out by a group of experts (*baksi*). In 1632 Dahai codified the orthography of personal and geographical names and created special letters to render Chinese and Sanskrit sounds. Some other (not specified) innovations seem to be the result of Kûrcan's and Kara's activity. Unspecified «additions», or maybe «corrections», had to be made by imperial order in 1633 to eliminate the last unclear points from the Manchu script.

3. Dahai was most probably not a Manchu by origin, since he, though belonging to the Manchu Plain Blue Banner, is not included in the «Genealogical Registers of the Manchu Eight Banners».

Notes

- 1 The innovations attributed to Dahai are the following: the dot on the right side of a word is used 1. to mark *g* and *d*; 2. to distinguish between medial *e* and *a*, *ye* and *ya*, *u* and *o*, and *yu* and *yo*, respectively. A dot is put on the left side of a word to mark *n* in the position before a consonant. Two dots are put on the left of *k* if it is followed by a consonant or if it occurs at the end of a word. A circle on the right stands for *h*.
- 2 A. W. Hummel (ed.), *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period 1644–1912*, Reprint: Taipei 1991, vol.1, p. 213.
- 3 J. R. P. King, The Korean Elements in the Manchu script reform of 1632, *Central Asiatic Journal* 31/3–4, 1987, pp. 252–286, quoting (p. 278) Li Guangtao, Lao manwen shiliao xu 老滿文史料序, *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica*, vol. 34, Taipei 1962, pp. 323–337.
- 4 See the articles by N. Di Cosmo, H. Okada and E. von Mende in: G. Stary (ed.), *Materialien zur Vorgeschichte der Qing-Dynastie*, Wiesbaden 1996.
- 5 *jisi* 己巳 day of the 11th moon of the 7th year of Tiancong.
- 6 *Taizong shilu* 太宗實錄, chapter 16, p. 6b.
- 7 *Baqi tongzhi* 八旗通志, chapter 236, pp. 5329–5331.
- 8 Edited by Ch'ien Chieh-hsien, Taipei, 1969, 10 vols.
- 9 Moroz I. T., K voprosu o periodizacii man'chzhurskogo pis'ma, *Narody Azii i Afriki*, 1969, no 3, pp. 130–134.
- 10 Carsten Näher, On the Periodization of Written Manchu, *Saksaha*, no. 3, spring, 1998, pp. 22–30 (cit. p. 23).
- 11 Guan Kexiao 關克笑, Lao manwen gaige shijian kao 老滿文改革詩問考, in: *Manyu yanjiu* 滿語研究, 2/1997, pp. 12–17.
- 12 *Jiu Manzhou dang*, vol.8, fol. 4002.
- 13 *juwan juwe uju dade tongki fuka akû dergi fejergi hergen ilgan akû ta da te de ja je ya ye fakcan akû gemu emu adali ofi bai gisun hese bithe ohode mudan ici be tuwame uthai ulhimbi ja niyalmai gebu ba na i gebu ohode tašarame ojarahû ofi*

aisin gurun i sure han i ningguci aniya niyengniyeri ujui biya de han i hesei dahai baksi tongkin [sic.] fuka sindame temgetulehe.

- 14 M. Weiers, Zur Registratur der mandschurischen Holztäfelchen über Ajiges Invasion der Ming im Jahre 1636, *Aetas Manjurica* 6, Wiesbaden 1998, p. 278.
- 15 *enduringge han i hesei Dahai baksi tacime hûlara juwan juwe uju i bithe be tongkin [sic.] fuka sindame dasaha*
- 16 *Baqi tongzhi* 八旗通志, *chujì* 初集, chapter 236. Reprinted by Dongbei shifadaxue 東北師範大學, Changchun 1986, vol.8, pp. 5324–5327.
- 17 Oshibuchi Hajime, *Manshû ishibumi kô*, Tokyo, 1943, p. 9.