

Interview Notes with Y

Date: May 18, 2021

Location: The University of Hong Kong

Interlocutor: Y (anonymous name in use per request)

Language in use: Putonghua (transcribed by Zhou Chengyi)

My *tai laolao* was born in 1912 into a Manchu Blue Banner (*lan qi* 藍旗) family in Beijing. They were from the bottom of the banner society. Before the downfall of the Qing dynasty, her father was a gatekeeper of the outer city (*waicheng* 外城). She once told me she had a name in Manchu language (*Manyu de mingzi* 滿語的名字) before marriage, but nobody remembered or used it anymore, herself included. Her elder brother, my *tai jiulaoye* 太舅老爺 always called her simply as *er guniang* 二姑娘. You know, in Chinese, *er* means “the second,” *guniang* means “girl.” Because she was the second child of her family.

My *tai laolao* passed away in 2001. She could not recall whether her family belonged to a Plain or a Bordered Blue Banner. She no longer remembered the exact information of her original clan name, nor did she speak Manchu as her mother tongue. After taking Chinese language classes organized by the PRC’s campaign to eliminate illiteracy, *tai laolao* renamed herself with a Han-style full name Ma X-hua 馬 X 華 and registered herself as a person of Han ethnicity (*Hanzu* 漢族) in the Ethnic Classification Project during the mid-1950s.

She told me that the character *ma* 馬 was used by her father in the Republican era and should be rendered in abbreviation from their old clan name. The first character of her Han-style personal name was borrowed directly from the generational character used in my ethnic Han *tai laoye*’s 太姥爺 name. The final character *hua* 華 meaning “China and Chinese” in a broader sense was of her own choice.

Tai laolao was married to *tai laoye* who came from a Han craftsman family by the arrangement of her parents. They made this choice out of concern for her material wellbeing. Her parents later decided to live with their third daughter who married into a Mongol banner family outside of Beijing. They did not live with my *tai laolao* and *tai laoye*’s family because they felt impossible to live with their Han in-laws, claiming the two sides were fundamentally different in many ways (*tai bu yiyang le* 太不一樣了).

I often heard *tai laolao* asserting likewise “differences” when she described her outstanding Manchu physical appearance and characters during her childhood. She thought her high cheekbones and slitty eyes were “typical” to Manchu women. Her daughter, my *laolao* 姥姥 (maternal grandmother), also believed she carried Manchu ethnic genes by growing much taller than ethnic Han women of her age and her feet big enough to demand wearing shoes of men’s size. My *laolao* also believed that she carried a brave warrior heart and enjoyed military-style dress code and discipline because of her Manchu legacy.

As for me, these differences hardly attribute to Manchu than to reflect their characteristics and the imprints of womanhood in China’s modern revolution era. To me, the most memorable Manchu moment of *tai laolao* is when she expressed her dissatisfaction over the thoughts and deeds of my father, a man of ethnic Han origin. He was talking to me about the revolutionary leader Sun Yat-sen’s 孫中山 oath to “expel Tatar barbarians, revive China”

(quchu daru, huifu Zhonghua 驅除韃虜, 恢復中華). There was also a time when she asked me to massage her [hǎ-le-bā]. It is the Manchu word *halba* for shoulder blade. She did not say *jianjiagu* 肩胛骨 in Chinese.

In my understanding, being Manchu is essentially “cultural capital,” intertwined with other identity labels as Beijing-nese (*Beijing ren* 北京人) and generations of the Beijing style alleys (*hutong zidi* 胡同子弟). Most of the time, I believe it was regional differences in accents and customs that set my *tai laolao*’s family apart from her paternal side of Han ethnicity (my *tai laoye*’s family), not necessary because she was a Manchu person.