

# The Horse in Chinese History

## A Brief Overview



Throughout China's long and storied past, no animal has impacted its history as greatly as the horse. From its domestication in northeastern China around 5000 years ago, the horse has been an integral figure in the creation and survival of the Middle Kingdom. Its significance was such that as early as the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600-1100 BC), horses and the vehicles they powered were entombed with their owners so as to be with them in the next life. During the Western Zhou dynasty (ca. 1100-771 BC), military might was measured by the number of war chariots available to a particular kingdom. As the empire grew, horses became essential for maintaining contact and control of the empire and for transporting goods and supplies throughout the vast and diverse country.

Sun Ji, one of the leading authorities regarding the history of the horse in China, stated that there were three major periods of significant change in China's equine population. The first was during the Han dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) when, under Emperor Wudi, the Chinese expended vast amounts in their efforts to import better horses from the West. The second occurred during the Tang dynasty (618-907) when horses were improved both by advances in domestic breeding practices and through the importation of Arab-type and Turkish horses. Finally, during the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) there was an overall decline in horse quality with the deterioration of the remnants of the Tang breeding programs. Ironically, this decline occurred during the first imperial dynasty controlled by nomadic horsemen.

China's very survival relied on its equestrian prowess. From the fourth century BC forward, the empire's greatest threat came from its nomadic neighbors to the north and west. By the rise of the Han dynasty, the Chinese had reluctantly been forced to abandon the war chariot in favor of mounted cavalry in order to face this threat. From the Xiongnu to the Mongols and Manchus, these northern tribes fielded some of the finest cavalry the world would ever see, while providing a constant thorn in the side of the Chinese.

The Chinese quest to maintain adequate equestrian forces to combat the nomadic raiders became a common thread throughout the imperial period. Massive military campaigns were waged in search of superior "blood-sweating horses" from the Ferghana (Dayuan) far to the west. These sojourns, while tremendously expensive in terms of resources and manpower, not only helped to improve the quality of Chinese horses, but also led to the establishment of major contacts between East and West and the opening of the famous Silk Roads.

The horse also played an important role in the mythology of early China. Closely associated with the dragon, both were thought capable of flight and of carrying their riders to the "home of the immortals." The ability to fly has been associated with survival throughout all of Chinese history.

Chinese genius produced three of the most significant inventions in equestrian history: an effective harnessing system based on the breast-strap, the stirrup, and the horse collar. Their harnessing system was the first to effectively utilize the horse's power without hampering its ability to breathe. It allowed for the development of shafted horse-drawn vehicles far more advanced and efficient than those of

their counterparts in the West. In fact, it would be more than a millennium before the breast-strap harnessing system would arrive in Europe. The invention of the stirrup was equally important and meant that for the first time mounted cavalry had a secure platform from which to fight. Sun Ji ranks the invention of the breast strap harnessing system and the stirrup, along with the invention of paper and gunpowder, as two of the four most significant Chinese inventions in their impact on world history.

As the military significance of the horse increased, so too did its role in leisure and recreational activities. "Dancing" dressage horses delighted emperors in court ceremonies as early as the Han dynasty, and reached their zenith with the elaborate performances of the Tang dynasty. Also during the Tang, both polo and hunting from horseback became fashionable for members of both sexes.

One of the great paradoxes of Chinese history is that despite the horse's significance to the survival of the empire, domestic horse breeding programs were rarely successful. As a result, China was forced to spend vast sums to purchase horses from its nomadic neighbors throughout most all of the imperial period. The Tang (618-907) - the first dynasty in China to be initiated by a people with a strong equestrian heritage - did make strong attempts to increase both the quantity and the quality of their horses. They established an intricate structure for managing their herds and enacted strict laws governing the treatment of the royal steeds. However, during the waning years of the Tang dynasty, their horse management system had fallen into disarray, eventually leaving a legacy of horse shortages for the Song dynasty (960-1279) similar to that encountered at the Tang's inception.

In many ways the Song dynasty represented a cultural highpoint in Chinese history. The Song, however, lacking the equestrian and militaristic traditions of the Tang, faced serious horse shortages throughout their reign.

Throughout much of the imperial period, China's salvation rested with the inability of the nomadic tribes to unite into an effective fighting force. That changed, however, in 1211 when the great general Genghis Khan turned his Mongol troops toward China. Although Genghis would not live to see the results of the campaign, in 1279 the Yuan dynasty was established under the control of his grandson, Kubilai Khan. In noting the prowess of the Mongolian horsemen, "Marco Polo reported that the Mongol horsemen could travel up to ten days, subsisting only on horse's blood, which they drank from a pierced vein."

By the beginning of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) the horse's significance in transportation had been somewhat diminished by the further development of water-based shipping. The horse did, however, remain essential for military security, but was in short supply. Towards the end of the Ming dynasty the Manchus became a significant force to be dealt with by the Chinese. They had refused to leave Beijing after being invited to help quell a rebellion in 1644. That same year they established the Qing dynasty (1644-1911).

While the horse may have diminished in practical importance in modern China, the spirit of Equus still runs deeply throughout Chinese art and culture. This is not to say that horses do not constitute a significant presence in China today. In 1995, it was estimated that the horse population of China exceeded 11,000,000. This equates to one-sixth of the horses in the world and includes more than 26 distinct breeds.

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