

*Human-Horse Bonds on the Frontiers of China: Co-species Living at the Xuanquan Postal Station as Seen through Excavated Han-Period Documents*

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Horses are often singled out as the animal which contributed most evidently to human historical development. Countless essays and articles have expounded on the role of the horse in warfare, transportation, and labor, as well as the related technological innovations of stirrups, chariots, and mounted weaponry. Until the dawn of machinery and motors, we lived in “a world made by horses” and, equally, a world made for horses.<sup>1</sup> However, such scholarship has tended to discuss horses in an abstract, distanced way. Horses inhabit the fields, battlefields, and stables of these histories without breathing, moving, or so much as stamping a hoof. It is the human riding the horse that takes center-stage. By failing to integrate the living horse in such studies, we have yet to appreciate the complexities inherent in systems reliant on the animate, fallible, compliant, and defiant horse. At a global and local level alike, people contended and co-operated with horses and horses co-operated and contended with people—making such systems the result of shared human and animal effort.<sup>2</sup> Nowhere is this more evident than in the horse-powered postal system which required a healthy stock of horses located at suitable intervals for the swift delivery of messages and information.

Much like the famed American “Pony Express,” Han-period China (202 BCE–220 CE) implemented a relay-style postal system to facilitate the rapid delivery of messages across the empire.<sup>3</sup> In the northwest, a network of garrisons, beacon-towers, watchtowers, and postal stations were established during a period of expansion into and beyond the Hexi 河西 Corridor, a narrow pass between the Tibetan and Mongolian plateaus and a natural “gateway” into China. In recent years, the Xuanquan 懸泉 postal station in Gansu province has become one of the most significant sources of excavated documents from the Han period, with particular relevance for the study of the horse-powered postal system.<sup>4</sup> Excavations of the site revealed extensive bamboo and wood slips that discuss the daily life and administration of the station. As the only excavated postal station possessing such extensive written material to date, the Xuanquan corpus provides unique insight into the daily administration and management of postal horses on the fringes of the Han empire.

Referenced second only to humans in frequency, the site’s postal horses are discussed in reams of reports, registers, notes, and ledgers which scrutinize their food rations, note their assigned tasks, and assess their appearance and condition. While studies have amply detailed the bureaucratic procedures surrounding the acquisition, use, and deaths of postal horses, the horses themselves remain

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<sup>1</sup> Re-phrased quotation from the title of Sandra Swart, “‘The World the Horses Made’: A South African Case Study of Writing Animals into Social History,” *International Review of Social History* 55, no.2 (2010): 241–63.

<sup>2</sup> That is not to say that animal-centric work has not been forwarded in the histories of horses in other regions. For horse-centric studies of colonialization, see Swart, “‘The World the Horses Made’” on South Africa and on horses’ experiences of war; see Gervase Phillips, “Writing Horses into American Civil War History,” *War in History* 20, no. 2 (2013): 160–81 on the horses of the American Civil War.

<sup>3</sup> For summative histories of the “Pony Express,” see the somewhat romanticized general works by Raymond W. Settle and Mary Lund Settle *Saddles and Spurs: The Pony Express Saga* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1955) and Fred Reinfield, *Pony Express* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1966) among countless other popular histories. There is also a surprising lack of horse-centered studies of the “Pony Express,” with entire books dedicated to the riders and businesses involved in the short-lived enterprise, but, despite nominal references to horses, hardly any academic interest in the horses which staffed the operation.

<sup>4</sup> For studies of Xuanquan and the postal system, see Y. Edmund Lien. “Reconstructing the Postal Relay System of the Han Period.” in *A History of Chinese Letters and Epistolary Culture*, ed. Antje Richter (Leiden: Brill, 2015): 15–52.

conspicuously silent, absent even, in current appraisals of life at the site.<sup>5</sup>

Taking an animal studies approach, this project first focused on the naming of horses—resulting in an accepted article with *Early China*. The composition of the names themselves reflect stable staff’s understanding and assessment of their equine co-workers, hinting at localized expectations, evaluations, and uses of postal horses. The striking use of human surnames and the veneration of aged horses suggests that the horses were entangled in humanized ideas of kinship, respect, and sentiment—not only highlighting the relevance of individual animal names in further studies of human-animal interactions, but also the centrality of the horses in the lives of Xuanquan stable staff. A second article aims to further unravel the complex emotional bonds forged between horses and humans at the site, re-assessing both the Xuanquan stables and its archives as being the direct result of human-horse co-operation, co-habitation, and competition. A final article aims to explore the usage of equine byproducts including milk and meat at the site to demonstrate how the presence of, and reliance on, horses shaped the architecture of time, space, and even diet at the station.

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<sup>5</sup> Zhang Junmin, “Xuanquan Hanjian mapi wenti yanjiu” 懸泉漢簡馬匹問題研究, in *Dunhuang Xuanquanzhi chutu wenshu yanjiu* 敦煌懸泉置出土文書研究 (Lanzhou: Gansu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2015), 300–83 gathers an impressive array of transcribed horse-related documents from the site with a brief exploration of horse names on pages 332–33. Additional articles: Zhang Junmin, “Xuanquan Hanjian zhuanma bingsi yuanshu ji qita” 懸泉漢簡傳馬病死爰書及其他, in *Jianbo: Disan ji* 簡帛: 第三輯, ed. Wuhan daxue jianbo yanjiu zhongxin 武漢大學簡帛研究中心 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2008), 287–98 and Zhang Junmin, “Dui Handai Xuanquanzhi mapi shuliang yu laiyan de jiantao” 對漢代懸泉置馬匹數量與來源的檢討, in *Jiandu xue lungao: Jusha pian* 簡牘學論稿: 聚沙篇 (Lanzhou: Gansu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2014), 457–73, both focus on the administrative processes associated with horse registers, ledgers, and reports in more detail. Sun Fulei 孫富磊, “Xuanquan Hanjian ‘Ganlu er nian bingsi ma shu’ suojian yizhi chuanma guanli” 懸泉漢簡《甘露二年病死馬書》所見驛置傳馬管理, *Dunhuang xue jikan* 敦煌學輯刊, no. 3 (2019): 164–70 further builds on Zhang’s work on the administrative processes related to equine reports.