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As early as the Shang Dynasty (16th–11th century BC), the horse had become an important asset in military and civil activities in China. The horse, which was essential for pulling chariots, played a considerable part in military expeditions. Its importance was just as great during the impressive royal hunts of this ancient age.

During the Warring States Period, (5th–3rd century BC), following the example of the barbarian tribes—most particularly the Xiongnu—the cavalry was introduced to Chinese armies and later proved to be indispensable and remarkable in battles against the enemies who continually harassed the Northern frontiers of the Zhou realm.

Around the 3rd century BC, the introduction of stirrups revolutionized the cavalry. As a matter of fact, stirrups, already familiar to the "barbarian" riders, bestowed them a strong superiority: with their hands free, riders could easily turn around and let their arrows fly toward the back. This

technique, or shooting position, is often referred to as the Parthian shooting method.

As shown by the discovery of numerous earthenware horses, riders and chariots in the alleys leading to the funeral chamber of the Qin emperor Shi Huangdi (259–210 BC), the Qin were very fond of horses. These animals were held in very high esteem since the origin of the Qin clan, whose members were minor vassals of the ruling Zhou dynasty.



The Qin clan, which dwelled at the northern end of the realm, had to defend the borders against nomad "barbarian" invasions. An osmosis phenomenon occurred between these populations, involving many cultural exchanges and a certain assimilation of their ways of life.



However, it is only with the Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) and most particularly under the reign of the emperor Wudi (141–87 BC) that the horse became economically important. This prosperous age, saw not only the creation of vast grazing-grounds, the development of training and breaking-in centres, but also the sending of missions in charge of finding the famous "blood-sweating" horse abroad. In 102 BC

a 40 000 man army In pursuit of that mission was sent to the West. Subsequent to the failure of this first mission, the emperor Wudi raised a second army of six thousand men.

Through such missions abroad, three thousand horses were brought back to the capital along what became later known as the famous "silk road"

Importance of the horse in China reached its peak during the territorial expansion policy of the Tang Dynasty (618 -916 AD), which brought a revival of power, wealth and unequalled ostentation. The important military campaigns and the increasing civil demand, forced the Chinese to create wider grazing-grounds, necessary to the many private or public breedings.

Among the various types of horses, the Chinese raised mainly the Mongolian pony, the "dragon-horse" of Kucha, the "blood-sweating" horse of Ferghana (now Ouzbekistan,



situated 5,000 km North-West of Chang'an) and the arabic thorough-bred originating from Bokhara and Samarkand.

The Tibetan invasions of the Shaanxi and Gansu provinces, deprived the Chinese of their wide grazing-grounds thus making the breeding of horses dwindle.

Nevertheless, the horse continued to play a major part in military activities and social life of the Tangs. The aristocracy used the



horse for hunting, in parades, as well as in sports such as polo games. This important demand made the horse an extremely expensive animal.

In the middle of the 7th century, the wedding of a Chinese princess and a Turc Khan was concluded at a price of 5,000 horses, some sheep and camels. Likewise, after the capture of the Tang capital by the Tibetans, the Chinese had to buy their horses from the Uygur Turcs at a price of 40 bundles of silk for one horse.

The fall of the Tang Dynasty saw the end of the golden age of the horse in China. Thereafter the horse became an ordinary domestic animal.





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