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THE DANCING HORSES OF XUANZONG'S COURT

In the Tang capitals of Chang'an and Luoyang, and especially in the imperial courts, the unusual and the exotic were very popular. Foreign music and foreign musicians were much in demand. Horses from the north and west, areas more suited to horse raising than the dense agricultural lands of the Chinese heartland, were highly prized. The caravans that came from Central Asia were so welcome that pottery representations of camels and their non-Han grooms were among the objects people commonly placed in their tombs.

The selections below give a glimpse of this love of the exotic in the most splendid of the Tang courts, that of Emperor Xuanzong (r. 713-755). This emperor not only patronized poets, musicians, and dancers, but even arranged for a troops of dancing horses to perform at his court. The poems given below were written by a leading court official, Zhang Yue (667-731), to celebrate the wondrous performances of these horses. Following the poems is a note written over a century later concerning the fate of the horses after the destruction of Xuanzong's court during a rebellion led by An Lushan (703-757), a general who had been a favorite at this court himself.

VERSE BY ZHANG YUE ON THE DANCING HORSES

Our sage emperor's perfect virtue matches Heaven's.
Heavenly horses have come for the ceremony from
far west of the sea.
They stride slowly with their feet arched, then kneel
on both knees.
Though high-spirited, they stay in formation and
stamp with a thousand hooves.

With colorful tails, eight rows form a column.
These dragons of our time—whose five colors match
the directions.

With bent knees and wine cups in their mouths, and
maintaining the rhythm,
Devotedly they make offerings for the sovereign's
long life.

The emperor's dragon colts are well-trained.
These celestial thoroughbreds are amazing.
Nimbly prancing, they keep in step with the music.
High-spirited, they step together, never deviating.

THE FATE OF THE DANCING HORSES

Xuanzong once ordered that a hundred horses be
trained to dance. They were divided into a right

and a left company and given names like Emperor's Favorite or Pride of the Household. From time to time fine horses were received as tribute from foreign states, and the emperor had these trained as well. Every one of them mastered the most marvelous skills.

By imperial order, the horses' cloths were of fine embroidery, their halters of gold and silver, and their manes and forelocks ornamented with pearls and jade. The tune they danced to was called "The Uprturned Cup," and had several dozen stanzas. They shook their heads and drummed with their tails, moving this way and that, in time with the music. A wooden structure with three tiers was set out and the horses would ride to the top, turning around as though flying. Sometimes strong fellows were ordered to lift one of the platforms and a horse would dance on top of it. The musicians stood on all sides, front, back, left, and right, dressed in light yellow tunics with belts of patterned jade. Only good-looking young men were chosen for this job. Each year at the Thousand-Autumn celebration of the emperor's birthday, the emperor ordered the horses to perform by the Hall of Zealous Administration.

Later on, after [the rebellion of An Lushan and the flight of] the emperor to Sichuan, the horses

were scattered, falling into private hands. An Lushan had often seen them dance and was entranced by them, and so had several sold to him when he was in Fanyang. Later these ended up in the possession of [the general] Tian Chengsi who knew nothing about their background. Confusing them with cavalry horses, he put them in the outer stables.

One day when the soldiers were having a celebration and musicians started to play, the horses began dancing and could not stop. The grooms thought evil spirits had possessed them and hit them with brooms. The horses, thinking this meant they were out of step with the music, stooped and reared, nodded and strained, trying to reproduce their old performances. When the stable master reported how weirdly the horses were acting, Tian Chengsi ordered them whipped. The more cruelly they were whipped, the more precise their dancing became. The whippings were increased until they fell dead in their stalls.

At the time there were in fact some men who knew that these were the dancing horses, but out of fear of Tian's violent temper, never dared speak up.

Translated by Patricia Ebrey



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