

Symphony of Nature and Life

Mongolian Horse Culture

By Li Yulin with Sun Xiaoyan (translator)



Mongolian horse with powerful and stocky build, and elegant and noble disposition. Photo by Ebo.

Roaming on the Mongolian Plateau and traveling through Mongolian herdsmen's meadows, you will always hear heartfelt words of praise for horses—the spirit of the grassland. The brief essay that follows accentuates the inseparable role of the horse in Mongolia's contemporary, historical, economic, and religious/spiritual cultures.

The Horse and Nomadic Culture

Originally from Central Asia, the Mongolian horse is the pride of Mongolian herdsmen. Some scholars believe that the Eight Fine Horses of Emperor Zhoumu (regime 976–922 BCE) in the Zhou dynasty (1046–771 BC) and the Six Zhaoling Horses of Emperor Taizong (Regime 627–650) in the Tang dynasty (618–907) were all descended from Mongolian horses.¹ Because of their powerful, stocky builds and elegant, noble disposition, Chinese acclaimed Mongolian breeds as “celestial horses.” Today, horses galloping on the Mongolian Plateau are descendents of these “celestial horses.” Since their first introduction to the Mongolian highland, they have been thriving for thousands of years.

Other animals are important in Mongolian culture, but the horse almost always ranks above sheep, cattle, goats, and camels in prestige.² The horse plays an irreplaceable role in the lives of Mongolian herdsmen. On the grasslands, an outstanding horse tamer is not only a superstar in herdsmen's eyes, but many women have highly romantic feelings toward a man who can master the Mongolian horse.



On a snow-covered plain, a Mongolian horse is leading the herdsman back home. Photo by Ebo.

The lives of Mongolian herdsman are inseparable from their animals. Nomadic Mongolians must have enough pasture and water for their horses and other livestock throughout the year while protecting them from freezing temperatures and wild animals. Thus, the Mongolian yurt was always built as a simple structure that was mobile enough to meet the herder's animal grazing needs in different seasons. Customarily, the Mongols call this seasonal migration a "pasture shift" and set up summer camps for access to pasture and water and winter camps in lower valleys to avoid wind and cold weather.

The migration of Mongolian people includes two modes. The first is organized through clans and encompasses large groups of people and animals. Other Mongol nomads engage in a nomadic lifestyle as individual families or in small groups. Horses are indispensable to both of these nomadic forms of organization. Young herders mount their horses to seek new pasture with lush grass and water, following the routes from previous years, and then return to their group when especially promising locales for a pasture shift are identified. Afterward, clans, friends, and families with livestock and possessions move to what will be a new encampment, with horse riders protecting elders, women, children, and livestock.

Horses are faithful companions for Mongolian people in their nomadic life. Horses are not only powerful, tamed tools but also inseparable friends from birth to death. Usually, Mongolian horses are intelligent and have good eyesight, hearing, and smell. Many are capable of comprehending their masters' intentions so well that some can even understand the Mongolian language. Violent horses tamed by Mongolian herders are extremely loyal to their masters. Typically, Mongolian horses, even the tamed ones, would rather die than let strangers ride on their backs.

Many ancient and recent stories tell of the intimate relationship between Mongolian horses and humans and of the loyalty of the horses to their masters. A stone tablet bearing the inscription "Picture of Horse with Integrity" stands in a yard in the Guangzhou Museum in Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, PRC. A picture of a typical Mongolian horse is engraved in the tablet. Its owner was Chen Liansheng (1777–1841), a former provincial commander-in-chief of Guangdong. After Chen Liansheng died fighting on the battlefield, the horse unfortunately fell into the hands of an enemy chieftain. The horse would not obey the chieftain, no matter how many ways he tried to put the horse under his control. Whenever he was let loose, the horse would gallop wildly northward. When the horse heard anyone expressing interest in taking him back to the northern grassland, he would follow, bowing his head and wagging his tail. Months later, the horse died. In memory of his loyalty to his owner and his determination, local people erected the stone tablet at the location where the horse gave up his own life.



Several herding families jointly migrate from one pasture to another; young members among them on horseback escort all the way.
Photo by Wenkai.

Mongolian horses are highly adaptable and can survive under even the most adverse circumstances, as long as grass and water are available. They can easily identify directions by intuition, avoid the obstacles ahead, and recognize the way back home. They also can recognize the boundaries of their masters' territories and defend against wolves on the grasslands.

The Mongol Empire's Debt to the Horse

Without the horse, there would have been no Mongol Empire. Horses were the most mobile and irreplaceable military equipment for soldiers. Mongolian horses also played important roles in providing food supplies for the military. Mares produce about eighteen to twenty-nine pints of milk daily, and these large quantities of easily digestible and highly nutritional horse milk could sustain several people. Each member of the Mongolian cavalry would have more than one horse; horses were, in a sense, mobile pantries. In stressful combat circumstances where mobility was crucial for mounted troops, riders could cut the veins in the horse's neck, drink their blood for nutrition, and apply the herb medication they carried with them to the horse's wound. Minor wounds could be healed in a day without sacrificing the advantages of the horse's running speed. Losing a small amount of blood was virtually harmless for a healthy horse. Mongol military forces were well-known for the ability to move from one locale to the other with almost astonishing speed, thanks to their horses. Their relative mobility, in contrast to opponents in battle, resulted in Mongol troops conquering large parts of Europe and Asia—a feat comparable to the early successes German mechanized troops in World War II enjoyed hundreds of years later.

Many Mongolian cavalry would have five or six warhorses. While charging or laying siege to a city, the cavalry would ride on one of them, and the rest would be tied with Cypress branches on their tails. When they were galloping, the branches pulling on the ground would produce huge amounts of dust, making people believe that thousands upon thousands of mounted soldiers were stampeding toward them. Calvary used this ruse as a strategy to scare enemies.

Many of the Mongolian battle horses who died on the battlefields were not killed by gunfire but by the exhaustion of constant galloping as they competed with other horses during combat. Mongolian horses were also legendary for not abandoning their owners who were wounded or even killed on the battlefield.

Multiple Manifestations of Horse Culture

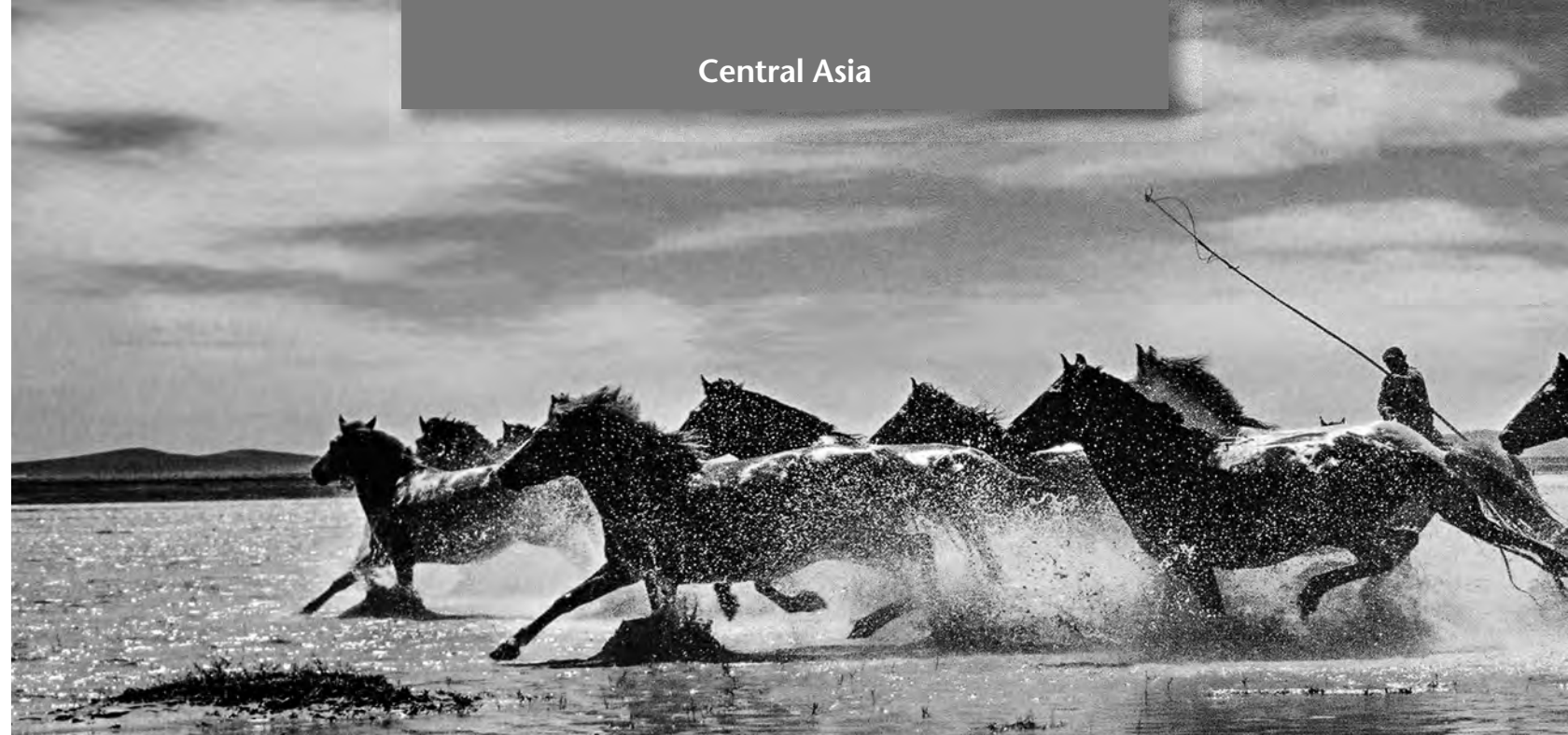
Every part of the Mongolian horse is useful. Horse manure can be used for fuel after being dried in the sun; horsehair can be woven into rope; horse skin can be made into boots; horse bones can be turned into fiddle bars; and horse meat can serve as food.

Koumiss, or fermented mare's milk, is a favorite alcoholic beverage of Mongolian herders. Yelü Chucai (1190–1244), a well-known high official during the Mongol Empire and Yuan dynasty (1206–1368), once acclaimed koumiss in one of his poems:

From the west, the heavenly horse comes for brewing the best wine, pouring out from the skin-made container it spreads fragrant smell into the air.

This sentence vividly expresses the affection Mongolian people have toward koumiss. Cited as "fluid cheese drinks" in Mongolian ancient records and documents, dairy products from horse milk and other livestock remain highly popular foods.

Horses are real symbols of wealth to Mongolian herdsmen, as is land to farmers and commodities to merchants. Some Mongolian people still proudly claim to the world, "We are the inhabitants of the



Gallop Mongolian horses in Eurasia were tamed on the Mongolian Plateau. Photo by Ebo.

grasslands, and we don't have any precious or valuable property. Our main assets are horses!"³ Today, people living in cities might be proud owners of automobiles, yet Mongolian herdsmen on the grasslands are proud of—and gain status from—their horses who have earned medals through winning races.

The Mongolians' value of horses has also influenced aspects of their law. Generations of Khans in the Mongol Empire issued decrees and prohibited exports of horses. Horse theft



Only the owner can ride on a Mongolian horse. Photo by Ebo.



became a criterion for capital punishment in Mongolian customary law because of the horse's critical cultural importance. Historically, the punishment for a horse thief was being cut apart at the waist. Because of their use both in daily life and in recreational activities ranging from hunting expeditions to horse races, the veneration of the horse in Mongolian culture has transcended socioeconomic class lines.

According to traditional beliefs, when a Mongolian herdsman returned to the earth upon death, his beloved horse or horses would be released to the grasslands. When wandering along the Mongolian grasslands, sometimes there will be a lonely horse lingering on a pasture, neighing, looking up to the sky, and then departing with reluctance. The horse may have lost his master and been released to nature while standing on familiar land, recalling their former master's kindness and seeking his footsteps on the familiar land. This sad and moving scene of the unrepeatable and irreplaceable tie between the horse and his lost master still frequently happens on the boundless Mongolian Plateau year after year. I believe there are endless memories and stories between each horse and his master that are only understandable to them.

The horse is, by nature, a gregarious animal. This is especially true for Mongolian horses. It is common that thousands of horses are herded on the grassland, and their owners group them only when it is necessary. The Mongolian horse has a strong sense of group awareness and collectiveness. Grassland herdsman often might see a pack of wolves chasing a small group of horses with a stallion (the leading male horse) in front guiding fellow horses away from danger. If the wolves circle tighter and tighter, a mare might suddenly stop and pretend to be limping and immediately fall behind, diverting the wolves to her. Seeing all the other horses, especially the ponies, fading away in the far distance, the mare will rear up high into the sky, burst into a wild gallop, heave a long and deep sigh, and gallop toward the other horses. If she is lucky, she leaves the wolves far behind and catches up with the other horses. If not, the wolves eat her.

When a Mongolian horse is getting old, he or she seems to sense that his or her death is drawing near. The horse will utter long wheezing cries and bursts of lament, looking up with tearful eyes, and intensely watching both the other horses and the yurt of his or her master. As it feels its life drawing to its end, the horse might walk toward the depths of the grassland, find a piece of land with green grass, and lie down to wait for death quietly. In that process, even if wolves gather, the horse will keep still and wait for what is supposed to happen.

Horse Equipment and Brands

Horses have also served as links in trade between Mongolian herdsman and other ethnic groups in different regions. Animal husbandry alone cannot satisfy the needs of the people living on the grasslands. As a result, horses have undertaken important roles in trade. Despite wars and attempts to control horse exports, horses were a vital part of the Mongolian culture's domestic and international economies. Domestically, horses influenced a wide range of economic activities, ranging from agriculture to handicrafts.

Naturally, horse equipment was gradually developed as part of nomadic culture. For reining their horses, talented Mongolian herders created various equipment such as bar bits, stirrups, and saddles.

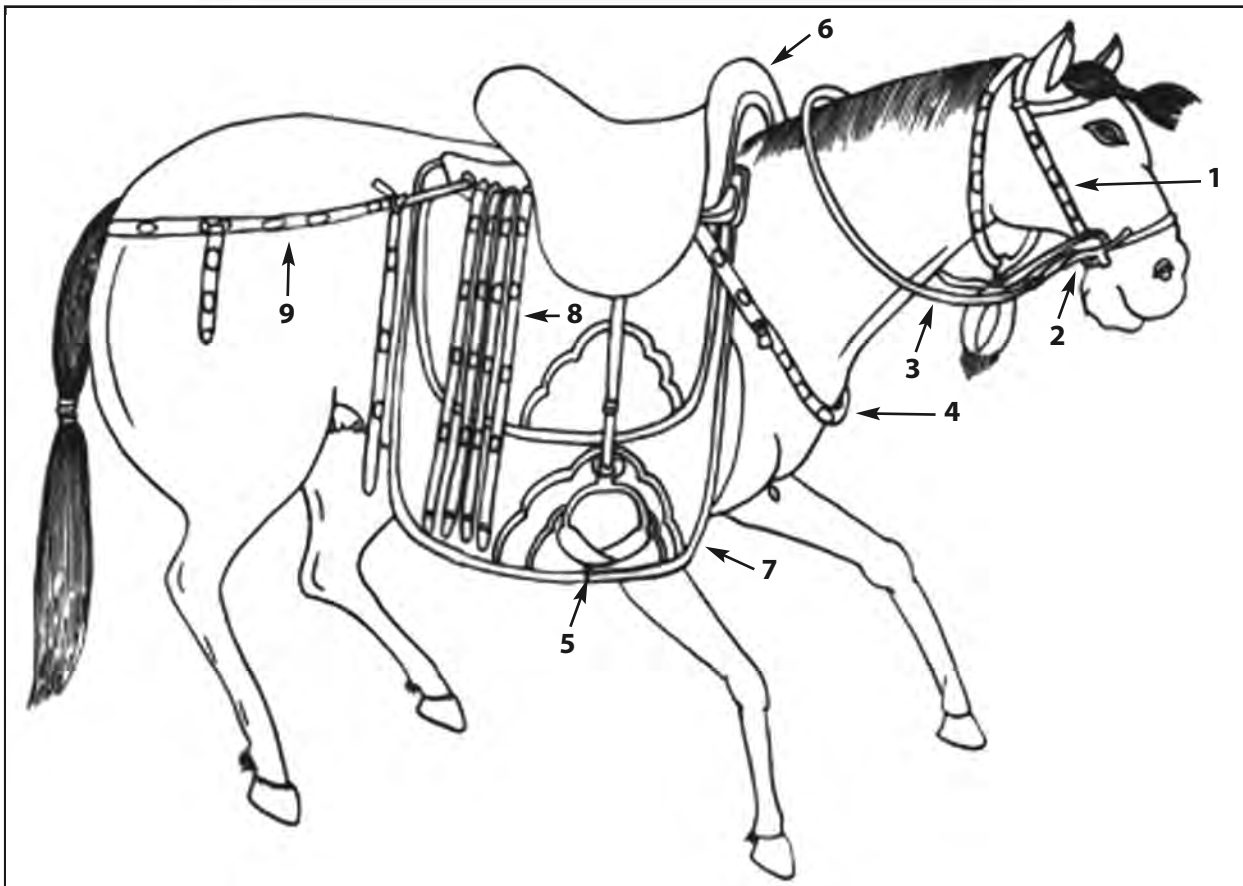


Diagram for harness of the Mongolian horse: 1. Headstall; 2. Bit; 3. Rein; 4. Hames; 5. Stirrup; 6. Saddle; 7. Mud Avoidance; 8. Belt with Hole; and 9. Cruppers. Diagram by author.

The horse brand epitomizes the brilliance of Mongolian horse culture. As is the case in most cultures, brands were employed in Mongolian culture to eliminate theft, thereby protecting private property. Every clan had its own distinct brand.

Mongolian horse brands manifest themselves in various unique shapes. There are shapes of animals such as deer, shapes of plants and flowers, shapes of heavenly bodies, shapes of geometry such as pasture diagrams, shapes related to religious icons such as dharma or the wheel of law, and written script from the Mongolian language.

The examples of brands, horse implements, and handicrafts that follow should serve as a visual testimony of the pervasiveness of the horse in traditional Mongolian culture.



Above: Examples of Mongolian horse brands.

Bottom, from left to right: horsewhips, horse-head bagging pot, horse-head fiddles, and a golden saddle of the Yuan dynasty⁴. Photos by Xu Ying.

Conclusion: Enduring Horse Culture

At present, the pastoral lands on the Mongolian Plateau are shrinking day by day, yet Mongolian horse culture still continues like a roaring and endless river. At the Nadam Fair, a traditional annual gathering and entertainment for the Mongolians, horse racing—along with wrestling and archery—is one of the “three manly games,” and it is always the most popular event. The commercialization of horse racing is evident, as numerous horse race facilities have been built in the grasslands, and horse racing festivals are organized in both Inner Mongolia and the Republic of Mongolia.

Mongolian horses are like cradles for the people living on the grasslands, and Mongolian horse culture is an everlasting tale of the history and passions of Mongolian horse riders. As long as Mongolian horses are neighing and galloping, the homeland will retain its beauty, and the grassland will endure.

This essay is only a brief introduction to the influence of the horse on Mongolian culture. In order to capture the deep spiritual significance of the horse in Mongolian culture, consider perhaps an excerpt from the lyrics of a Mongolian long song. Long songs are often epics that date back thousands of years. This excerpt is from “The Invisible Hanshan Mountain,” an ancient long song familiar to all herdsmen. Hanshan Mountain is in the northeast of present-day Inner Mongolia and is a sacred place, but the subjects of this essay are equally dear to the Mongolian soul.

*The invisible Hanshan Mountain is in my mind,
and my loyal fine horses are galloping in my heart. ■*

NOTES

1. See descriptions in Rui Chuanming, “The ‘Hu Horses’ and the Chinese Cultural Life,” *Historical Review*, No. 3, 1994; and “Reference Sources for Names of Famous Ancient Horses,” *Jinan Historical Studies*, No. 1, 2002.
2. See descriptions in Menggutoli, “Concepts of the Horse in Ethnic Groups of the Ancient Altai Language Family,” *Northern Cultural Relics*, no. 02, 1995.
3. See descriptions in Boris Vladimirtsov’s *The Social System of the Mongols*, translated by Liu Rongjun, Beijing: China Social Science Press, 1980.
4. This golden saddle of the Yuan dynasty was first unearthed at Wuyegou, the Xianghuang County, the Xilingol League in Inner Mongolia in 1988. It was supposed to be one of the funerary objects for a Mongolian noble maiden. It is the only saddle artifact from the Yuan Dynasty excavated until now. The average height of the pommel is 8.2 inches and the widest part of it is 9.1 inches; the average height of the cantle, 2.6 inches, and the widest part of it is 6.3 inches; and the length of the pommel wing is 12.9 inches and its width is 2.6 inches. Depicted flowers of crabapple as a frame on the pommel of the saddle, the main part is a semi relief carving of a crouching deer, surrounded by peonies woven with branches. On the cantle are mainly patterns of curly grass. This artifact is now in the collections of the Inner Mongolia Museum.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Menggutoli. “Concepts of the Horse in Ethnic Groups of the Ancient Altai Language Family.” *Northern Cultural Relics*, No. 02. 1995.
- Vladimirtsov, Boris. *The Social System of the Mongols*, translated by Liu Rongjun. Beijing: China Social Science Press, 1980.
- Xiao, Gaohong. “Horse Brands, Their Impacts, and Their Relationship with Horse Administration.” *Agricultural Archaeology*, no. 2. 1988.
- Xing, Li. *The Nomadic China*. Beijing: New World Press, 2006.

LI YULIN is Professor and President of the Inner Mongolia University Art College (IMUAC). He serves as the Editor-in-Chief of the IMUAC journal; Secretary-General of the Chinese Association for Anthropology of Art; and contact person in China for Study Asia, a cultural and education exchange with American institutions funded by the Freeman Foundation. His publications in Chinese journals include titles such as “Utopian Socialism” and “On Perspectives on Equality of French Materialism in the Eighteenth Century.” He has a Master’s Degree in Law and Legal Affairs from Tianjin Normal University.

SUN XIAOYAN, who was primarily responsible for the translation of this article, is Associate Professor of the English Language at the Inner Mongolia University Art College (IMUAC) in China. She has served as translator for IMUAC delegations that visited the US for the past ten years. Her publications include “Comparison of Expressionism Theme between the Plays by Cao Yu and Eugene O’Neill” and “Characteristics of Localization of Cao Yu’s Expressionism in His Dramas.” She has a Master’s Degree in Literature from Inner Mongolia Normal University.

EDITOR’S NOTE: Special thanks go to **JUEFEI WANG** of the Freeman Foundation for his role in procuring this article and his invaluable help in assisting with its development.