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A Horse-Driven Court: Eunuchs and Horsemen in the Early-Ming Directorate of Imperial Horses

ABSTRACT:

In the early fifteenth century, the Ming emperor Yongle (r. 1403–1424) embarked on a grand project to enlarge the imperial herd and create a cavalry that could rival any Mongol force. Large-scale rearing operations were spread throughout frontier provinces and the two metropolitan regions, Beijing in the north and Nanjing in the south. The need for the proper taming and training of war horses led to an unlikely collaboration between the Directorate of Imperial Horses, a eunuch agency, and, predominantly, Mongol horsemen who were recruited for their expertise in equine husbandry. Furthermore, the multiethnic nature of the Directorate aided diplomatic missions geared towards obtaining superior horses from foreign lands. Finally, horsemen exhibiting exceptional military skills earned a ticket to the Imperial Guard, the elite army unit that served, among other things, as the emperor's bodyguard. Thus, an avenue, based on knowledge, skill, and physical ability, opened a way for displaced boys and men of foreign background to reach the center of the Ming court.

KEYWORDS:

Ming dynasty, horses, eunuchs, Mongols, horsemen, Directorate of Imperial Horses, Imperial Guard

If you'd walked a few miles northeast from the imperial city of Beijing during the early-fifteenth century, you would have witnessed a land full of horses. Farther away, throughout Shuntian 順天, the metropolitan prefecture, numerous ranches, pastureland, and barns punctuated the agricultural landscape. Alongside horses roamed uncountable oxen, sheep, and mules. At the gates of the Forbidden City, one could get a glimpse of foreign envoys bringing elephants, camels, cheetahs, and tigers. It was a scene fit for a Mongol khan, yet this was the court of the third Ming emperor, Taizong 太宗, also known by his reign-period name, Yongle 永樂 (r. 1402–1424).

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He came into adulthood in Beijing after his father, the Ming founder, enfeoffed him as the prince of Yan, the ancient name for the region. He served as protector and chief military leader of a section of the long northern border, honing his skills as a mounted warrior throughout numerous encounters with Mongol raiders. After assuming the throne, he implemented a policy of active defense on the northern border, repeatedly heading out on military campaigns deep into the steppe.¹ To support this military effort, Yongle moved the capital from its initial location in Nanjing to Beijing, making the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) the first ethnically Han dynasty to rule China from its northern frontier. The capital became the headquarters of military operations in the north and a giant military camp.² At the same time, he oversaw the creation of a grand herd that would maintain an ample domestic supply of warhorses.

Two agencies managed different aspects of horse rearing: The Court of Imperial Stud (*Taipusi* 太僕寺, hereafter CIS) was the chief government office overseeing levies from the population in the form of colts and fodder, as well as imports from tribute and border trade. And the Pasturage Directorate (*Yuanmasi* 苑馬寺) managed herding undertaken mainly by soldiers in frontier provinces. The plan succeeded; within twenty years, the number of registered horses increased from under 40,000 to approximately 1.7 million.³ However, quantity did not mean quality. As an experienced horseman, the warrior emperor knew that he needed excellent mounts and well-trained riders who could follow him to battle. The problem was that native Chinese horses were not as strong or durable as their Mongolian and Central Asian counterparts, nor were average native (mostly peasant) Han soldiers experienced in equine care or cavalry warfare. Consequently, the training of warhorses and fighting on horseback were forms of military technology that China sorely lacked.

Into this void entered an unlikely act of cooperation between the eunuch Directorate of Imperial Horses (*Yumajian* 御馬監, hereafter DIH) and, mainly, Mongol horsemen. The DIH operated outside the horse administration, serving as an office of the imperial palace that

¹ Arthur Waldron, *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth* (New York: Cambridge U.P., 1989).

² Hok-lam Chan, “The Chien-wen, Yung-lo, Hung-hsi, and Hsüan-te Reigns, 1399–1435,” in Frederick W. Mote and Denis Twitchett, eds., *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 7, The Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644, Part 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1988).

³ Noa Grass, “A Million Horses: Raising Government Horses in Early Ming China,” in Rotem Kowner et al., eds., *Animals and Human Society in Asia: Historical, Cultural and Ethical Perspectives* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 312–14.

cared for the emperor's prized animals. However, forming an avenue that bypassed the bureaucracy, it accepted men and children who exhibited equine skills as workers in the imperial ranches and, upon demonstrating exceptional military skills, were incorporated into the cavalry units of the Imperial Guard, or *Jinyi wei* (literally, Embroidered Uniform Guard 錦衣衛) while still under the tutelage of their eunuch commanders. This article is about the men whose equine skills transformed a minor inner-court office into the primary manager of horse-rearing operations in Beijing.

Within the growing body of work on raising horses in the Ming dynasty, the DIH has not received much scholarly attention. In Chinese, Fang Zhiyuan offers an institutional history that follows the DIH from its origin as a small eunuch agency to one of the most powerful at court, supervising thousands of soldiers and rearing thousands of horses in the mid-fifteenth century, its gradual infiltration into the Beijing military, and its part in the eunuch abuse of power under the Zhengde 正德 emperor (r. 1505–1521).⁴ While his work first raised attention to the centrality of the DIH in the Beijing horse administration and its connection to soldiers of the Imperial Guard, the present paper focuses on the crucial cooperation between eunuchs and horsemen, and argues that owing to their skills, they carved a path to the center of the imperial court and the close circle of the emperor.

Furthermore, Fang's account describes the growth of eunuch power in a straightforward manner, without challenging the vilifying tone of the historical sources, which portray the rise of Ming eunuchs to power as a sign of corruption. Similarly, in modern scholarship, they are viewed as a feature of intensifying autocracy and imperial independence.⁵ Although there were outstanding eunuchs who provided exceptional service to the dynasty, as an institution, both interpretations assume eunuchs to be a hindrance to good government. Other, more recent studies of eunuchs in the Ming and Qing dynasties examine their valuable contributions to elite culture and statecraft.⁶ Henry Shih-shan Cai has termed Ming eunuch directorates a "parallel government," with a shadow eunuch agency for every formal ministry.⁷

⁴ Fang Zhiyuan 方志遠, "Mingdai de Yumajian" 明代的御馬監, *Zhongguo shi yanjiu* 中國史研究 2 (1997), pp. 140–46.

⁵ Robert Crawford, "Eunuch Power in the Ming Dynasty," *TP* 49.3 (1961), pp. 115–48.

⁶ Norman A. Kutcher, *Eunuch and Emperor in the Great Age of Qing Rule* (Berkeley: U. California P., 2018); Ju-Yu Scarlett Jang, *Art, Politics, and Palace Eunuchs in Ming China* (Routledge: Taylor & Francis, 2026).

⁷ Henry Shi-shan Tsai, *The Eunuchs of the Ming Dynasty* (New York: SUNY P., 1991), p. 81.

This paper goes a step further, arguing that the DIH did not merely shadow the horse administration but completed it in areas of equine expertise that it lacked.

Next, this paper offers a more nuanced understanding of the Imperial Guard as a multifaceted entity of imperial power that also incorporated the DIH horsemen. The prevailing image of the elite unit has been its role during the first Ming emperor's reign as a secret police force that rid the court of real and imagined conspirators.⁸ Alongside two eunuch-led secret-service agencies, the Eastern and Western Depots, it became notorious for ruthlessly persecuting, mainly political, adversaries. Hok-lam Chan has written that these organs of imperial control were among the "most despicable aspects of Ming despotism."⁹ However, Yongle had fashioned out of it an elite cavalry unit that served as his entourage: even before his coronation on New Year's Day, the future emperor nominated a Mongol chief as its vice-commander.¹⁰ While continuing to function as secret police, imperial guardsmen were also charged with raising and training horses.¹¹ This task remained their specialty throughout the dynasty.¹²

The following discussion also contributes to the study of early-Ming Beijing as a multiethnic society. It builds on the pioneering work of Henry Serruys, who studied the large numbers of surrendering Mongols, Jurchens, and Muslims whom the first Ming emperors incorporated into military guards. He was the first to notice their overwhelming presence in the Imperial Guard, which he called the metropolitan police, and asked why so many of them served in that particular unit.¹³ This paper answers the question by identifying the horsemen of the Imperial Guard as the DIH horsemen. In recent years, David Robinson has shown that the Ming court was a multiethnic, porous enclave into which talented men from all walks of society could gain employment, power, and fame. In vivid examples, he reveals the involvement of eunuchs and Mongols in imperial matters while never straying too far from the

⁸ Charles O. Hucker, *The Ming Dynasty: Its Origins and Evolving Institutions*, (Ann Arbor: U. of Michigan P., 1978), p. 68.

⁹ Chan, "Chien-wen, Yung-lo, Hung-hsi, and Hsüan-te," p. 214.

¹⁰ *Ming Taizong shilu* 明太宗實錄 (1430; Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo, 1962-1966), j. 14, pp. 4b-5a.

¹¹ Zhang Tingyu 張廷玉 (1672-1755), *Ming shi* 明史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974; hereafter, *MS*) 85, p. 2190.

¹² Shen Shixing 申時行; Li Dongyang 李東陽, *Da Ming huidian* 大明會典 (1587; Beijing: Wenhai chubanshe, 1964), j. 227, p. 5b.

¹³ Henry Serruys, "Foreigners in the Metropolitan Police during the 15th Century," *OE* 8.1 (1961), pp. 59-83.

shadowy world of outlaws and bandits.¹⁴ Likewise, in his latest monograph, John Dardess conveys the tolerance of early-Ming emperors toward foreign communities of warriors in Ming territory.¹⁵

Here, the DIH and its horsemen are examined through the prism of skill and expertise. As Dagmar Schäfer demonstrates, technical skills and knowledge were a legitimate avenue to social mobility and wealth. In the early-fifteenth century, men with practical skills, whom she terms “specialist practitioners,” participated in high-level discussions at court without having to pass the imperial exams.¹⁶ In addition, Wang Jinping demonstrates that the social composition of early-Ming Beijing was particularly receptive to non-Confucian knowledge. At the time, north China was still heavily influenced by Mongol–Yuan social structures that had marginalized Confucian education for over a century.¹⁷ In this social context, we can better understand the relative ease with which eunuchs and Mongols were invited to take charge of the Beijing equine operations and perform other tasks in proximity to the emperor. We can therefore consider the court’s active absorption of technical know-how as one of the reasons for the horse-breeding program’s phenomenal success.

Finally, rather than embarking on an institutional history of the DIH, this paper offers a social history of the early-Ming court. It reveals the means by which outsider groups with no social status managed to rise to the center of court activities. Eunuchs and horsemen cared for the emperor’s war horses, participated in diplomatic missions and ceremonies, took part in imperial hunts, and fought against raiding Mongols. Despite their central place in everyday politics, they operated independently of the formal bureaucracy, rendering them, for the most part, transparent in the mainstream corpus of government and statecraft writings.

A twelve-volume history of the horse administration, published in the early-seventeenth century, offers abundant information on horse-rearing regulations in the Ming but contains only a short chapter on

¹⁴ David Robinson, “Men of Force and the Son of Heaven,” in idem, *Bandits, Eunuchs, and the Son of Heaven: Rebellion and the Economy of Violence in Mid-Ming China* (Honolulu: Hawaii U.P., 2001), pp. 99–120.

¹⁵ John Dardess, *More than the Great Wall: The Northern Frontier and Ming National Security, 1368–1644* (Basingstoke: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), pp. 78–80, 123–29.

¹⁶ Dagmar Schäfer, “Useful Work: State Demands and Craftsmen’s Social Mobility in Fifteenth-Century China,” *Technology and Culture* 62.2 (2021), pp. 373–400.

¹⁷ Wang Jinping, *In the Wake of the Mongols: The Making of a New Social Order in North China, 1200–1600* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2018), pp. 227–28.

the DIH, covering only the period after the sixteenth century.¹⁸ The *Statutes of the Ming Dynasty*, the official compilation of government regulations, contains several imperial declarations regarding the DIH.¹⁹ Likewise, the *History of the Ming*, published several decades after the dynasty's fall in 1644, briefly mentions the alliance of court eunuchs with a group called Braves (*yongshi* 勇士), which, as shall be seen below, were no other than the foreign horsemen of the DIH.²⁰

In the face of this brevity, the *Veritable Records*, or, the reign histories edited from daily court chronicles, provide richer, though anecdotal, information on the affiliation between the DIH and the Imperial Guard in which horse rearing played a crucial role. It is this anecdotal information that allows us to widen the extremely narrow lens of official documents and see a little more of the realities of early-Ming court society. The following pages follow the initial admission of horsemen into the DIH, continue with their involvement in the tribute system, discuss the importance that early-Ming emperors attached to expert equine knowledge, and end with the expansion of DIH horse-rearing operations in the Beijing region.

FROM WARRIORS TO HERDERS TO WARRIORS

In its succinct manner, the *History of the Ming* recounts how the Yongle emperor welcomed soldiers fleeing from the battlefield in Mongolia (referred to as “*yibei* 迤北”) and had them herd horses in return for food, supplies, wives, and housing.²¹ He gave them the nickname Braves and placed them under the supervision of the DIH, where they herded and cared for the emperor's mounts. Later, whoever arrived at court with horses was placed under its charge. Who were these men, and why were they attached to a eunuch agency at court? Were they Chinese soldiers? Unemployed vagabonds? Or foreigners who crossed enemy lines?

Another version of this account, from the earlier *Collected Statutes*, describes “soldiers and civilians” fleeing from the region north of the Ming borders during the following Xuande 宣德 reign (1425–1435).²² These terms are more likely to refer to Han people. Comparing the two

¹⁸ Yang Shiqiao 楊石橋, *Mazheng ji* 馬政紀 (1595; Yingyin wenyuange Siku quanshu, 1781; Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1983–198), vol. 662, j. 1–12.

¹⁹ Shen et al., *Da Ming Huidian*; in particular, j. 23, pp. 1a–11a, on horse stables, hey fields and grasslands; and j. 134, pp. 27a, 47a–51a, on the Braves.

²⁰ *MS* 11, p. 92.

²¹ *MS* 89, p. 2190.

²² *Da Ming huidian*, j. 134, p.6b.

sources, we could conclude that initially, displaced Ming soldiers and peasants with no homes to return to were employed as extra labor in the imperial stables. However, once either the Yongle or Xuande emperor opened the DIH to anyone bringing horses, we can easily deduce, for reasons touched on below, that foreigners began to fill the ranks.

The *History of the Ming* continues to explain that these newcomers created a personnel problem related to the processing of their funds. They were initially placed under the Yulin 羽林 cavalry battalion of the Imperial Guard to receive emoluments, but since these people were all registered under the same name, their rations were impossible to calculate. The emperor created a new unit for them called the Four Galloping Guards 騰翺四衛, presumably to correct the inaccuracies. Such confusions suggest that these were strangers and that incorporating them into the system required administrative adjustments.

Another point to keep in mind is that the Qing-era editors of the *History of the Ming* were extremely cautious when referring to non-Han people, since they were writing for their new Manchu masters. Nevertheless, in the Ming-era records, the horsemen of the DIH are referred to as “barbarians 胡.” This umbrella term was convenient for referring to a variety of steppe and Central Asian peoples, especially when their background was of no particular consequence. Indeed, the constant disregard of their identities suggests that they were a different crowd from the Mongol chiefs who surrendered along with their families and followers. The Ming bestowed honors and riches on these Mongols, perceiving them as leaders of the foreign communities that had settled within the realm. Some were allowed to maintain their titles from one generation to the next in honor of their loyalty to the throne.²³

In contrast, the Braves remained outsiders whose utility to the throne depended on their skills. The Hongxi 洪熙 emperor (r. 1424–1425), in a characteristically benevolent attitude, ordered military guards stationed on the northern border to take in orphans of “barbarians” and send those who “know how to rear horses” to the DIH.²⁴ In another occasion, the Xuande inspected 600 colts sent for training. He remarked that they were magnificent but untamed and suggested handing them over to the newly arrived foreigners because “barbarians are excellent in taming and training horses.”²⁵

²³ David Robinson, *Ability and Difference in Early Modern China: A Mongol Family at the Ming Court* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2025).

²⁴ *Ming Xuanzong shilu* 明宣宗實錄 (1438; Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo, 1962–1966), j. 10, p. 3b.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, j. 90, p. 5a.

The common attributes of the boys and men mentioned in these two imperial utterances are that they were not ethnically Han and were perceived as especially able in caring for horses. Furthermore, the arbitrariness of the declarations gives the impression that this was not an organized policy but a way to deal with boys and men who sought employment with army and palace personnel on the one hand, and to find tamers and trainers, who were apparently scarce in the palace horse administration, on the other. In other words, this was a precedent born out of contingency.

Next, the fact that the emperors themselves issued the order to employ foreigners in a palace agency points to a recruitment process occurring outside the regularized bureaucratic system. Rather than employing peasants as *corvée* laborers out of the registered population, as was the case for every imaginable form of menial labor, the palace tapped into an alternative workforce that was available and well suited for the task.

Before partnering with the Braves, the DIH did not rear military horses. Its eunuchs performed the tasks of zookeepers, tending to the emperor's dogs, cats, birds, as well as exotic animals such as rhinoceroses, elephants, giraffes, leopards, and prized horses.²⁶ These animals arrived with tributary missions that flocked the Ming court from its founding to the end of the fifteenth century.²⁷ But as horse imports rose, numbering between several hundred and several thousand each year, they began to fill the grazing grounds a few miles northeast of the Forbidden City on the flatlands of Zhengcunba 鄭村壩. Whereas most of the imported mounts were distributed among military units, the superior ones in particular belonged to the emperor and were under the jurisdiction of the DIH. As the size of the herd grew, the DIH sought able herders and trainers who were, as the previous section had shown, mostly foreign.

Judging by the tribute items recorded in the *Veritable Records*, the primary purpose of the tribute system was the import of horses.²⁸ During this time Mongols were mostly excluded from tribute trade, whether as a conscious policy or simply because they did not at the time form a

²⁶ Thomas Allsen, "Natural History and Cultural History: The Circulation of Hunting Leopards in Eurasia, Seventh-Seventeenth Centuries," in Victor H. Mair, ed., *Contact and Exchange in the Ancient World* (Honolulu: U. Hawaii P., 2006), pp. 116–35.

²⁷ David M. Robinson, *Martial Spectacles of the Ming Court* (Boston: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013), chap. 5.

²⁸ Hiroshi Watanabe, "An Index of Embassies and Tribute Missions from Islamic Countries to Ming China (1368–1644) as Recorded in the Ming Shih-lu 明實錄 Classified According to Geographic Area," *MTB* 3 (1975), pp. 285–347.

polity solid enough to deal with on a diplomatic level.²⁹ However, regular dealings with Mongols were taking place in border horse-markets in the Liaodong 遼東 and Datong 大同/Xuanfu 宣府 military strongholds, with the market in Liaodong being the more consistent of the two.³⁰ Furthermore, those that serviced the Ming were active as emissaries of the court. As Serruys noted, when Ming envoys returned from tribute missions with horses, they were always accompanied by Mongols and Jurchens, and most of them were from the Imperial Guard.³¹ After all, they possessed the knowledge to appraise the quality of steeds and knew how to care for them along the way. Finally, eunuchs of foreign backgrounds, though not necessarily from the DIH, often participated in tributary encounters too.³² Together, they provided a valuable service, dealing with foreigners in the context of the international horse trade.

The initial path from stable boys to soldiers of the Imperial Guard is not very clear, though, at least in one case, the transition was effected directly by the DIH director's recommendation: in a 1458 petition to the throne, he requested that twenty stable boys be registered as Braves and awarded silver for their new status.³³ This request was completely independent of the Ministry of War which was in charge of military appointments. The process of recruitment differed in manner and in motive from the general practice of incorporating Mongols and other foreigners into the army. Since the establishment of the dynasty, accepting surrendered Mongols and settling them either as civilians or as soldiers within Ming territory was a measure to placate them. But the policy was followed with some hesitation, since its subjects were from groups that could turn against local populations or return to Mongolia at will. In many cases, they were relocated to southern regions, far from the northern border, where they could become a menace.³⁴ In other cases, the dynasty utilized friendly foreign combatants on its frontier, but they remained a separately-designated entity called *yibing* 夷兵.³⁵

²⁹ Wang Liping and Geng Tian, "Breaking the Containment: Horse Trade between the Ming Empire and Its Northern Neighbors, 1368–1570," *The Journal of World History* 33.1 (2022), pp. 37–71.

³⁰ Henri Serruys, *Sino-Mongol Relations during the Ming, III: Trade Relations: The Horse Fairs (1400–1600)*, (Brussels: Institut Belge de Hautes Etudes Chinoises, 1975).

³¹ Idem, "Foreigners in the Metropolitan Police," pp. 69–70.

³² Morris Rossabi, "Two Ming Envoys to Inner Asia," *TP* 63.1–3 (1973), pp. 1–34.

³³ *Ming Yingzong shilu* 明英宗實錄 (1467; Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo, 1962–1966), j. 278, p. 12b.

³⁴ Henri Serruys, "Were the Ming against the Mongols' Settling in North China?" *OE* 6.2 (1959), pp. 131–59.

³⁵ Charles O. Hucker, "Ming Government," in Mote and Twitchett, eds., *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 8, Part 2*, pp. 68–69.

Within these attitudes of practicality and suspicion, the Braves stand out as a different entity. First, they did not surrender as a group or bear any former military designation, unlike most Mongol officers who surrendered. Second, this was not an ethnically exclusive group. In a rare mention of ethnicity, the Zhengde reign history states that in 1513 the emperor approved the admittance of a Jurchen into the Braves.³⁶ Third, not only were they not removed from the capital for security reasons, they served at very close proximity to the emperor. Moreover, perhaps most striking is the fact that they took orders only from their eunuch commanders and the emperor himself.

What emerges is a close, unofficial relationship among eunuchs, foreign horsemen, and emperors. This relationship was further fostered by the Braves' roles in the emperor's entourage, leading hunts, participating in ceremonies, and entertaining him in military spectacles at court.³⁷ Hunting parties and military inspections were yet another area of cooperation between horsemen and their eunuch commanders, since they involved not only horses but also birds of prey, such as hawks and falcons from the DIH compounds, as well as tigers and leopards. These outings, away from the ceremonial confines of the palace, were occasions for the emperor to bond with his warriors and foster camaraderie. In a reversal of roles, eunuchs and horsemen were admitted to the emperor's inner circle and enjoyed a degree of proximity that most court officials could never attain.

In a commemorative poem written by Yang Rong 楊榮, one of Yongle's top officials, the Braves, while still under the Yulin cavalry battalion (referred to as the *Yulin mengshi* 羽林猛士) are at the center of the imperial hunt. Yang describes them in full magnificence, wearing brocade attire, holding feathered arrows drawn on carved bows, their halberds and armor shining in the sun. The emperor is riding among them, on a decorated white steed, seated on a golden saddle. They slay every animal in site – hares and foxes, wild geese and cranes, a small boar and a rhinoceros.³⁸ The excitement and sensuality of the scene are tangible: Yang describes the blue sky, a brilliant background for the colorful imperial banners, the sounds of leaves whirling in the wind, and the cries of joy among the men upon gaining a bountiful meal.

³⁶ Serruys translates the term Braves as Courageous Soldier; "Were the Ming against," p. 155.

³⁷ Robinson, *Martial Spectacles*, pp. 157–59. See also the involvement of Imperial Bodyguard in imperial processions in *MS 85*, p. 2190.

³⁸ Robinson, *Martial Spectacles*, p. 41.

On another occasion, when Yongle was on an inspection tour in Tongzhou, northeast of Beijing, he received reports of a tiger attacking horses. In response, he ordered the Braves to capture it alive.³⁹ Again, the historiographical entry for this has no particular purpose besides celebrating the prowess of the emperor's entourage, as a way of praising his majesty. The modern reader can appreciate the power of such a shared experience in building trust between an emperor and his warriors who set out towards danger at his behest.

While in the first half of the fifteenth century the historical record praises the martial feats of the Braves, in the latter half it is much more critical of their unlawful behavior. The reign history of the Zhengtong emperor states that they received special favor for their "excellence in horsemanship and archery," which led them to engage in rueful and illegal activities. When complaints reached the emperor he ordered the three chief judicial bodies to investigate all allegations, big or small, and send them to him for final judgment. But whether they received punishment or not is up to speculation.⁴⁰

In a later incident, a soldier serving under the DIH named Fu Haiye 福海夜 gathered several men and broke into the home of the eunuch director Kong Jing 孔璟 and stole silver utensils. The authorities investigated and recommended execution, which was carried out on the Braves' training grounds.⁴¹ Here again, the emperor's personal intervention and the decision to execute on the DIH training grounds suggest a determination to handle affairs internally. Here too, it is worth pausing to consider why this entry made it into the historical record in the first place. Common thefts were hardly national issues that warranted recording for posterity. The officials who compiled the reign history in the 1460s were writing at a time when there was an open struggle to regain control of the DIH, in particular over its growing staff and the consequent demand for funds. Therefore, alongside a growing intolerance of foreign and martial culture, they highlighted the DIH as a nest of corruption and crime.

With all the allure of the Braves as an untamed and wild bunch, they were ultimately loyal warriors guarding the emperor. In his moving account of the final battle at Tumu 土木, the battle in which the Zhengtong emperor fell captive in 1449, Tan Qian 談遷 writes that at the height of the battle, as enemy troops were closing in on him, the

³⁹ *Taizong shilu*, 1430, j. 250, p. 1a.

⁴⁰ *Yingzong shilu*, 1467, j. 293, pp. 4a-5b.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, j. 340, p. 1a.

emperor sat down on the ground, surrounded by his *suwei* 宿衛 soldiers who were falling one by one while the arrows rained on them like insects.⁴² Tan did not use the term Braves but chose the Yuan-dynasty Chinese term for Imperial Guard, namely, *kesig* in Mongolian. The difference between the three terms notwithstanding, they all refer to horsemen who serve as the emperor's bodyguard and handle his horses.⁴³ It is therefore most likely that the men who died protecting the Zhengtong emperor were the Braves. Though remaining outside any official bureaucratic designation, a status that rendered them nameless in the historical record, they proved to be of vital service to the throne and the closest men to the emperor in battle.

REARING HORSES IN BEIJING

The truism of the Han Chinese woeful lack of equine expertise was so widely acknowledged in the Ming that Wu Cheng'en 吳承恩 satirically expressed it in the brilliant novel *Journey to the West*. When the supernatural hero of the novel, Monkey, arrives at the Court of the Jade Emperor he is granted a salaried position as head of DIS. Monkey describes what he sees as he tours his new domain:

The accountants were in charge of getting supplies, the stewards groomed and washed the horses, chopped hay, watered them, and prepared their food; the deputies and assistants saw to the overall management. Never resting, the *bima* 避馬 oversaw the care of the horses, fussing with them by day and watching over them diligently by night. Those horses that wanted to sleep were stirred up and fed; those that wanted to gallop were caught and placed in the stalls.⁴⁴

In this passage, even the chief caretaker of the emperor's horses, the *bima*, has no clue how to treat them and is diligently doing the exact opposite of what they require. Whether this description accurately reflected the actual situation or not, it captured a reality that the Yongle emperor had to face when he ascended to the throne. The Veritable Records mention several occasions in which he either pleaded with his

⁴² Tan Qian, *Guoque fu Beiyoulu* 國權, 附北游錄 (Taipei: Dingwen shuju, 1978), j. 34, p. 2169.

⁴³ Romeyn Taylor "The Yüan Origins of the wei-so System," in Charles O. Hucker, ed., *Chinese Government in Ming Times: Seven Studies* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1969).

⁴⁴ Wu Cheng'en, *Journey to the West* 西遊記, trans. Anthony C. Yu (Chicago: Chicago U.P., 2012), pp. 147-50. The author would like to thank professor George Qiao for the reference.

soldiers to take good care of their mounts or failed to contain his anger in the face of their incompetence.⁴⁵

In his influential statecraft compendium published in the late-fifteenth century, Qiu Jun 邱浚 pointed out the total lack of care in the horse ranches:

In the past, there were a thousand team managers (*qunzhang* 群長) for a thousand horses over a distance of fifty *li*. Nowadays, there is one stable manager (*jiuzhang* 厩長, or *yuzhang* 圍長) and a few old and weak stable boys tending to horses confined in stalls.⁴⁶

A thousand team managers for a thousand horses must be an exaggeration or a typo, since protocol stated one manager for every fifty mounts.⁴⁷ However, Qiu's point was not only the lack of manpower but also the fact that they were languishing in confinement, with nobody to take them out to pasture or ride them.

While the Mongols ruled China, they too had difficulties finding skilled people for equine care. When a requisition of 100,000 horses from south China did not meet the quota, one official told the emperor that there were "few horse breeders" in the south.⁴⁸ This is worth remembering when reading sweeping remarks on the inherent equine abilities of "barbarians." Obviously, being Mongol did not make one an expert horse breeder or tamer. Likewise, in the early Ming, horse breeders were scarce in Beijing as well. Eight years after opening a Pastorage Directorate north of Beijing, Yongle closed it, and moved the horses over to the CIS. This meant that the horses were transferred from military to civilian hands and from frontier pasture to settled communities in the Metropolitan region. Tani attributes this shift to the vulnerability of herds so close to the border, where Mongol raiders were never too far away. Another explanation may be that soldiers were needed as a workforce to rebuild Beijing and fill the swelling military ranks. Consequently, the burden of rearing and supplying horses fell on the local peasant population.

⁴⁵ Grass, *A Million Horses*, p. 316.

⁴⁶ Qiu Jun, *Daxue yanyi bu* 大學衍義補, in *Siku quanshu zhenben* 四庫全書珍本, 一集 (1487; Taipei: Shangshu yinshuguan, 1971), j. 125, p. 12a.

⁴⁷ In Shaanxi, the horse-rearing program involved both peasants and soldiers. Every team head was responsible for two stallions and eight mares. A team chief was in charge of five teams; Zhao Tingrui 趙廷瑞 and Ma Li 馬理, *Shaanxi tongzhi* 陝西通志 (1542; *Siku quanshu congshu*, 1682), j. 122, p. 3a-b.

⁴⁸ Allsen, "Natural History and Cultural History," p. 176.

The emperor appointed sinecure officials (*xianguan* 閒官) to teach them the craft.⁴⁹ The term sinecure official referred to men who received a monthly emolument without being part of the formal bureaucracy. In fact, the Imperial Guard also served as an umbrella agency for such men. These included Mongol chiefs who surrendered to the Ming, along with their followers, families, and livestock;⁵⁰ but also sons of Han nobles, foreign guests, eunuchs, and other favorites of the emperor.⁵¹ In the social context of the time, they were probably foreigners residing in the capital, though not necessarily operating under the DIH. Nevertheless, this effort signifies a push towards specialized horse rearing in the capital. And the willingness to place this responsibility in foreign hands contributed to the growing dependence on the DIH.

Despite the initiative to educate the population, a division of duties emerged: the peasants' main task was growing and collecting beans and grass for the horses, whereas the DIH horsemen took the horses out to graze, rode them regularly, and trained them.⁵² They led them out to pasture between mid-May and mid-August, in correspondence with the grass growth season.⁵³ In the early autumn, horses returned to the stable compounds, where probably Han corvée stable workers fed them.

The breeding operations of the DIH were so successful that by 1430 it was supplying war horses not only for the Imperial Guard but for the entire northern border army, sending thousands of mounts as far as the western outpost in Ningxia province and the Xuanfu garrison in Shanxi.⁵⁴ It was also the center for training warhorses: in 1433, the CIS sent 6,306 colts from Nanjing to the DIH in Beijing for taming.⁵⁵

Upon regaining the throne after years in Mongol captivity, the former Zhengtong (but now titled as Tianshun 天順 emperor; r. 1457–1464), commissioned the *Ming National Gazetteer*. Li Xian 李賢 (1408–1466), the highest-ranking official in the emperor's close circle, was in charge of the compilation. He had survived the disastrous military

⁴⁹ *MS* 92, p. 2271.

⁵⁰ Some of them were in the DIH; *Yingzong shilu*, j. 285, p. 2a.

⁵¹ Liew Foon Ming, *The Treatise on Military Affairs of the Ming Dynastic History (1368–1644)*, Part One (Hamburg: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens, 1998), p. 180, n. 10–11.

⁵² Yang, *Mazheng ji*, j. 11, p. 2a–b.

⁵³ J. M. Suttie, "Grazing Management in Mongolia," in J. M. Suttie et al., eds., *Grasslands of the World*, Plant Production and Protection Series 34 (Rome: Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, 2005).

⁵⁴ *Xuanzong shilu*, j. 61, p. 2b; j. 70, pp. 8a–9b, and j. 82, p. 9a.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, j. 107, p. 1b.

campaign of 1449 that ended in Zhengtong's captivity, and he continued to hold high court positions.⁵⁶ As part of the efforts to rebuild the military, he accompanied the emperor on reviews of mounted archers late in 1460;⁵⁷ and most likely set out with the imperial entourage to inspect war horses at Zhengcunba a month later.⁵⁸ He included his impressions in the *Gazetteer*, which was completed in the following year. Using an emotive tone that can be read as a statement of purpose, he reiterated the paradigm of a large cavalry:

Outside the city walls, in Zhengcunba, twenty stables are spaced three or four *li* apart. There is a meandering wall surrounding them all. Inside, there are fenced pens. Outside, the land is wide and flat. From spring to autumn, when the grass is lush and full, the horses graze outside. Between them, many foals are born and multiply. The state can indeed rely on them for its strength and prosperity.⁵⁹

Despite the severe blow the Ming suffered at Tumu, and although emperors no longer ventured into the steppe, reliance on cavalry continued to dominate military strategy. As a result, DIH operations expanded. By the early-sixteenth century, the DIH managed all horse rearing in Beijing. It controlled over fifty sites of hayfields and grasslands, and twenty-three stables throughout Shuntian. Each stable had a designated hayfield 草場 and a barn 馬房倉 that served as the stable's pantry for the winter months. Hay fields were not cultivated plots. Instead, they were tracts of grassland from which peasants cut the grass for hay. They also served as small compounds where livestock could graze. In addition to horses, the grounds also housed oxen, sheep, and elephants.⁶⁰ For instance, after the wall of one of these sites collapsed in 1462, the emperor ordered the finding of a fresh tract of grassland wide enough to build two sites for elephant taming.⁶¹

The total acreage of Zhengcunba was 55,342 *qing* 頃, approximately 880,000 acres, an astonishing one-third of the total cultivated land in Shuntian.⁶² Over time, boundaries between tracts of land with different

⁵⁶ *MS* 176, p. 4673.

⁵⁷ In December 1460, the review was of mounted archery. *Yingzong shilu*, j. 321, pp. 3b-4a.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, j. 322, pp. 4a.

⁵⁹ Li Xian 李賢, *Da Ming yitong zhi* 大明一統志 (1461; Beijing: Guojia tushuguan chubanshe, 1965) j. 1, p. 3a.

⁶⁰ Shen et al., *Da Ming huidian*, j. 23, p. 1b.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, j. 23, p. 7b.

⁶² *Ming Wuzong shilu* 明武宗實錄 (1525; Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo, 1962-1966), j. 58, pp. 2b-3a.; *Da Ming huidian*, j. 1, p. 17.5b.

designations tended to blur. Control over this vast tract of land offered eunuchs opportunities to gain wealth and power akin to that of landowners. For example, in 1444, the vice-minister of revenue, together with the assistant director of the rites directorate (a eunuch agency), surveyed Zhengcunba and sent a report to the throne. They accused the eunuchs of seizing 侵占 the land and having soldiers cultivate it for their own profit. The report also mentioned other unauthorized facilities, including a temple and a kiln. They suggested shutting them down, confiscating the illegally held land, and punishing the culprits. However, the Zhengtong emperor did the opposite: he pardoned them and granted each eunuch one *qing* and each soldier 50 *mu* 畝 of land. Yet he also ordered annual inspections by a scrutiny official (*jishizhong* 給事中) and an imperial censor (*yushi* 御史), warning that future violators would not be pardoned.⁶³

In this decree, we find unequivocal support for the eunuchs, which thus acknowledged their entitlement to profit from the land. It also informed officials that Zhengcunba was outside their jurisdiction. In the light of such imperial support, the DIH continued to grow despite official criticism. In 1447, the Ministry of Revenue requested a shipment of grain for 3,594 eunuchs, workers, and soldiers.⁶⁴ And in 1458, a DIH director requested winter clothes for 4,900 eunuchs and soldiers. After the emperor granted this request, another for an additional 11,000 soldiers followed.⁶⁵ Whereas the Ministry of Revenue handled the first request for supplies, a decade later, it came directly from the head eunuch. This may seem like a minor change, but it was, in fact, a serious procedural breach. One of the most important roles of revenue officials was to accept requests and issue payments to government offices according to verifiable staff records. Not only were officials barred from inspecting the DIH, its director now bypassed them completely.

In the decades that followed, the Ministry of Revenue fought to regain control over the funds being funneled by the DIH that reached 500,000 piculs of grain for a reported 30,000 registered staff.⁶⁶ To this we should add an unknown number of horses: unknown because this information became inaccessible to government officials after the Yongle reign.⁶⁷ Overassessment was a common method to increase funds. It was part of the scrutiny offices' 六科 job to uncover such discrepancies

⁶³ *Yingzong shilu*, j. 119, p. 4b.

⁶⁴ *Yingzong shilu*, j. 152, p. 3a.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, j. 297, p. 4b; j. 298, p. 5b.

⁶⁶ *MS* 89, p. 2190.

⁶⁷ *Xuanzong shilu*, editorial notes, p. 1687.

through audits. However, without access to updated information, the only recourse was to approach the emperor directly, demanding access to the restricted information. In one of these appeals to the throne, one revenue official sarcastically remarked on its horses that “the few became many, and the dead were made alive.”⁶⁸

This imperially-condoned independence from official scrutiny brought about an excess of members who gobbled up large quantities of grain each year. Moreover, the number of soldiers registered suggested the formation of a separate army in Beijing under the command of eunuchs. According to later commenters, it reflected the gradual takeover of the Imperial Guard by DIH eunuchs.⁶⁹ This development was criticized as mismanagement rather than as a sign of military strength. Only in the early decades of the sixteenth century did officials gain access to the directorate's operations and could exercise more control over its funds.

CONCLUSION

Replying to a warning not to employ foreign soldiers in the Imperial Guard, the Yongle emperor said: “Heaven creates talent everywhere. The ruler just needs to ensure that he taps the worthy ones, Chinese or not.”⁷⁰ As this paper demonstrated, this type of thinking underlay the recruitment of foreign horsemen for the purpose of acquiring, herding, training, and riding horses into battle. Within the broader policy of accepting, mainly, those surrendering Mongols who decided to seek a better livelihood within the Ming borders, the horsemen of the DIH stand out as a distinct professional group, selected for their specialized knowledge and skill that coalesced around the main junctures of producing top-rate warhorses. This distinction is also evident by the fact that they remained in imperial favor even as the court became less welcoming to foreigners after the mid-fifteenth century.⁷¹ Even though in 1513, as mentioned previously, officials had suggested sending a surrendering Jurchen horseman to the far south, the Zhengde emperor refused to do so. He wanted him with the Braves. Good horsemen were too valuable to send away.

⁶⁸ *Ming Xiaozong shilu* 明孝宗實錄 (1509; Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo, 1962-1966), j. 143, p. 13b.

⁶⁹ *MS* 89, p. 2190.

⁷⁰ Translated by Dardess, *More than the Great Wall*, p. 78.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 193-215.

Once we acknowledge the presence of the DIH eunuchs and horsemen in close vicinity to the emperors and their possible influence on them, we can better understand the political dynamics in and the military strategy that were formed at the Ming court. In particular, we should imagine the Braves having encouraged the Zhengtong emperor before setting out on the ill-fated punitive campaign against the Mongols in 1449. The historical record places the blame on the emperor's tutor and most powerful man at court, the eunuch Wang Zhen 王振. Nonetheless, the emperor must have felt confident, surrounded by the cavalymen of his imperial bodyguard. They were skilled in the battle techniques of the steppe and may have been familiar with the terrain more than any of his generals. He most likely grew up with the heroic tales of his father and grandfather, feeling it was his turn to add a chapter to such an illustrious heritage.

Finally, the story of the DIH and its horsemen raises questions regarding other specialist-practitioners who may have contributed to the attitudes and manners of conduct in the Ming court that never made it into the historical record – the translators, diviners, arms specialists, animal tamers, physicians, entertainers, cooks, and tailors. The histories of these men, and possibly women, deserve further research. Their histories will contribute to a fuller and more realistic portrait of Ming society. In seeking these histories, further inquiry into the role of eunuchs as intermediators between the emperor and the world outside the inner court may prove fruitful. We might discover that, unlike the official documents in which officials are the movers and makers, in everyday life, these undocumented servants of the throne played leading roles in the drama of Ming court society.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CIS (in main text)	Court of Imperial Stud (<i>Taipusi</i> 太僕寺)
DIH (in main text)	Directorate of Imperial Horses (<i>Yumajian</i> 御馬監)
<i>MS</i>	Zhang Tingyu 張廷玉, <i>Ming shi</i> 明史