

MEIR SHAHAR

The Donkey in Late-Imperial and Modern North China

ABSTRACT:

The Chinese history of the donkey is unknown. Despite its significance in the quotidian lives of late-imperial China, the draft animal has received no scholarly attention. This essay outlines the donkey's diverse roles in Chinese agriculture, transportation, and commerce. It charts the centrality of donkeys (and mules) in village life, no less than their salience in the cityscape. The representations of the donkey in literature and the visual arts are surveyed, as is its appearance in the religious sphere. The geographic region covered is north China, where wheat is grown, and equines have been the preferred draft animals. The time span ranges from the sixteenth through the mid-twentieth century, namely the late-imperial and Republican periods.

KEYWORDS:

donkey, Chinese husbandry, Chinese agriculture, animals in China, late-imperial period

Two modern masterpieces of political satire – George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) and Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* (2006) – might illustrate the relative significance of the horse and the donkey in England and in China, respectively. The former's equine protagonist is a strong, dedicated, and loyal workhorse named Boxer. Orwell's biting allegory of Stalinist dictatorship has the draft animal faithfully serve his revolutionary leader only to be betrayed by him. Even though "there were days when the entire work of the farm seemed to rest upon his mighty shoulders,"¹ the long-suffering beast is eventually sold to the knacker. By contrast, the equine hero of the Chinese novel is a donkey. Mo Yan's animal allegory of Chinese communism has an executed landowner being reborn as a black burro. Toiling in the fields that once belonged to him, this donkey is praised by his erstwhile servant and current master: "Old Blackie, my friend, you worked hard last year. Half the credit for the good harvest goes to you."² Generous affirmation notwithstanding, during the great famine of 1958, the diligent donkey would be torn to pieces and devoured by the starving peasants.

➤ Meir Shahar, Dept. East Asian Studies, Tel Aviv U.

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¹ George Orwell, *Animal Farm: A Fairy Story* (London: Longmans, 1964), p. 17.

² Mo Yan, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, trans. Howard Goldblatt (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2008), p. 70.

In the authors' choices of equine protagonist, we glimpse the diverse ecologies of the British Isles and China. Orwell's familiarity with the English farm may well have prompted his portrayal of the horse as the hardest working animal, while the sympathy of Mo Yan for his long-suffering donkey was likely spurred by his childhood in a small Shandong village. Whereas in England, the horse was the principal draft animal, in north China these were usually donkeys (and mules) that ploughed the land, turned millstones, and pulled carts.

The Chinese history of the donkey is unknown.³ Scholars have paid no attention to the prominence of the draft animal in Chinese quotidian lives. This essay offers preliminary observations on its diverse roles in agriculture, transportation, and commerce. It charts the centrality of donkeys (and mules) in village life, no less than their salience in the cityscape. The geographic region covered is north China, where wheat is grown, and equines have been the preferred draft animals. The rice-growing provinces of south China – where the water buffalo reigns supreme – go beyond this paper's scope. The time span ranges from the sixteenth through the mid-twentieth century, namely the late-imperial and Republican periods.

It is the donkey, not the horse, that is our concern. Nonetheless, the former's ubiquity is related to the latter's relative scarcity. The following pages indicate that, during the late-imperial period, donkeys outnumbered horses in north China by an average ratio of ten to one. The peasants' reliance upon the humble equine might shed light on a perennial problem that plagued native regimes: The shortage of war-horses. The donkey's choice as principal beast of burden might mirror the difficulty of rearing its nobler kin. The native ecology that made horses scarce (necessitating their importation from abroad) likewise accounted for the profusion of donkeys.⁴

³ On the global history of the donkey – with a special emphasis on the ancient Near East, Europe, and the colonization of the Americas and Australia – see Jill Bough, *Donkey* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011); Anthony Dent, *Donkey: The Story of the Ass from East to West* (London: George G. Harper, 1972); and Frank Brookshier, *The Burro* (Norman: Oklahoma U.P., 1974), which alludes to China (pp. 149–63). Scholars have studied the literary and artistic trope of the Chinese poet as donkey-rider; see Peter C. Sturman, "The Donkey Rider as Icon: Li Cheng and Early Chinese Landscape Painting," *Artibus Asiae* 55:1–2 (1995), pp. 43–97; Peng Peng 彭鵬, "Zhongguo shanshui hua zhong qi lu xingxiang jiedu" 中國山水畫中騎驢形象解讀, *Yishu tansuo* 藝術探索 23.4 (2009), pp. 15–17; and Zhang Bowei 張伯偉, "Dongya wexue yu huihua zhong de qilu yu qiniu yixiang" 東亞文學中的騎驢與騎牛意象, in *Dongya wenhua yixiang zhi xingsu* 東亞文化意象之形塑, ed. Shi Shouqian 石守謙 and Liao Zhaozheng 廖肇亨 (Taipei: Wenchen wenhua, 2011), pp. 271–330.

⁴ The practice of acquiring horses from the northern nomads dates back to the first millennium bc; see H.G. Creel, "The Role of the Horse in Chinese History," *American Historical Review* 70.3 (April 1965), pp. 647–72. On the difficulties faced by the Ming dynasty in rear-

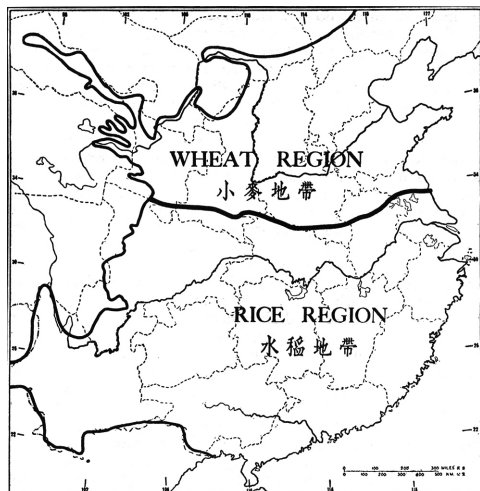
THE COUNTRYSIDE

The Republican period (1911–1949) produced several large-scale surveys of Chinese agriculture. These quantitative (and qualitative) studies were conducted either by Chinese and Western specialists who were bent upon the improvement of farm life and the increase of agricultural yields, or by Japanese social scientists, whose research was related to their country's military expansion in China. The studies provide statistical evidence of the donkey's prominence in northern Chinese villages. Among equines, donkeys were the most prevalent, followed in descending order by mules and – in much smaller numbers – horses.

We begin with an extensive survey that was conducted between 1929 and 1933 by a team of mostly Chinese researchers from the University of Nanking (Nanjing). Headed by the agricultural economist John Lossing Buck (1890–1975), the survey covered 16,786 farms in 168 localities across the entire country. Buck and his colleagues distinguished between two principal regions of agricultural production: The wheat-growing area of north China (comprising Shandong, Hebei, Henan, Shanxi, Shaanxi, Gansu, and parts of Jiangsu and Anhui), and the rice-growing regions of south China (comprising Zhenjiang, Hubei, Hunan, Sichuan, Fujian, Guangdong, Guangxi, Guizhou, and parts of Jiangsu and Anhui) (see map 1). With respect to animal husbandry, the main difference between the two regions concerned the use of water buffalos and equines. Whereas in the south the water buffalo was the most common draft animal, in the north equines – especially donkeys – figured prominently. (Oxen were widely used in both regions).

This essay considers the wheat-growing regions of north China. As regards these, Buck and his associates concluded that oxen and donkeys were the most widely used labor animals, followed in descending order by mules and horses. Crunching the data for the northern provinces combined, they reached the following average of draft animals per farm: oxen 0.51, donkeys 0.47, mules 0.17, and horses 0.11. Donkeys were thus between four and five times more prevalent than horses, which ratio was even more pronounced in some subregions of north China. According to the Buck survey, in the winter wheat-millet region of Shanxi province, the average of draft animals per farm was: oxen 0.44,

ing native horses, see Tani Mitsutaka 谷光隆, *Mindai basei no kenkyū* 明代馬政の研究 (Kyoto: Tōyōshi kenkyūkai, 1972). On its import of horses, see Morris Rossabi, "The Tea and Horse Trade with Inner Asia during the Ming," *Journal of Asian History* 4.2 (1970), pp. 136–68; and Henry Serruys, *Sino-Mongol Relations during the Ming*, vol. 3: *Trade Relations: The Horse Fairs* (Bruxelles: Institut Belge des hautes études Chinoises, 1975).



Map 1. *Two Principal Agricultural Regions of China*

From Buck, *Land Utilization in China* (cited n. 5), p. 25.

donkeys 0.35, mules 0.11, and horses 0.04. Assuming that this estimate is correct, donkeys outnumbered horses in Shanxi province by a ratio of approximately nine to one.⁵

The Buck survey was based on a selection of farms from numerous localities across the entire country, only a small number being chosen in each. A different kind of survey was conducted between 1926 and 1933 in Ding 定 county, Hebei Province (some 100 miles southwest of Beijing).

Here a large number of peasant households – all from the same place – were surveyed. The research team (of the Chinese Mass Education Movement) counted the total number of labor animals that were owned by 400 farms. These amounted to 135.6 donkeys, 109.5 mules, 76 oxen, and 36.3 horses, (the fractional numbers being correct for 56 families reported owing one-half or one-third of an animal). Judging by the Ding county survey, the donkey was not only the most widely used equine (as in the Buck survey) but also the most widely used of all draft animals (surpassing the ox).⁶

The most comprehensive survey of the economy, society, and government of rural north China was conducted between 1935 and 1942 by teams of mostly Japanese – but also Chinese – researchers who were associated with the Japanese South Manchurian Railway Company (Minami Manshū Tetsudō Kabushiki Kaisha 南滿洲鐵道株式會社). The

⁵ See John Lossing Buck, *Land Utilization in China: A Study of 16,786 Farms in 168 Localities, and 38,256 Farm Families in Twenty-Two Provinces in China, 1929-1933* (1937; rpt. New York: Paragon Book, 1968), p. 246, table 1. When conducting his survey Buck was husband of the future Nobel laureate Pearl S. Buck (1892-1973), author of the acclaimed novel of Chinese peasant lives *The Good Earth* (1932).

⁶ The results of the Ding county survey were published in English by Sidney D. Gamble, who served as the “Research Secretary of the Chinese National Association of the Mass Education movement”; see his *Ting Hsien: A North China Rural Community* (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1954), p. 71.

Mantetsu survey – as it is known, for short – was based upon thorough fieldwork in select Hebei and Shandong villages. It included detailed and exhaustive statistical data on all aspects of rural lives as well as in-depth interviews with hundreds of peasants. Its published volumes featured, in addition, a wealth of Chinese-language documents, from transcribed contracts and stele-inscriptions to official documents. The Mantetsu reports have served as source materials for the most influential twentieth-century studies of rural China, including Ramon Myers's *The Chinese Peasant Economy* (1970), Philip Huang's *The Peasant Economy and Social Change in North China* (1985), and Prasenjit Duara's *Culture, Power, and the State: Rural North China 1900–1942* (1988).⁷

The Mantetsu reports confirm the data gathered by the Buck and Ding county surveys, according to which the donkey was the most widely used equine. They further indicate – like the latter survey – that it surpassed the ox in significance. The following are the total numbers of draft animals in four Hebei villages as counted by the Mantetsu researchers:

1. Dabeiguan 大北關 village, Pinggu county, northern Hebei (98 households): 61 small donkeys, 9 oxen, 7 mules, 4 horses, 0 large donkeys;
2. Michang 米廠 village, Fengrun county, northeastern Hebei (114 households): 15 small donkeys, 15 mules, 8 oxen, 3 large donkeys, 0 horses;
3. Qianliang Gezhuang 前梁各庄 village, Changli county, northeastern Hebei (101 households): 22 small donkeys, 3 mules, 1 horse, 0 oxen, 0 large donkey;
4. The western section 西牌 of Lujiazhai 盧家寨 village, Zunhua county, northeastern Hebei (71 households): 35.75 donkeys, 2 mules, 2 oxen, 1 horse (The fractional number of donkeys being correct, some households owning one-half, one-third, or one-quarter of the draft animal).⁸

Two, three, or sometimes even four households were discovered to share the same draft animal. Interviewing the peasants, the Mantetsu researchers learnt of the system by which it would rotate between them:

⁷ On the Mantetsu surveys, see Philip C. C. Huang, *The Peasant Economy and Social Change in North China* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1985), pp. 34–46; Ramon H. Myers, *The Chinese Peasant Economy: Agricultural Development in Hopei and Shantung, 1890–1949* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1970), pp. 27–39; and Prasenjit Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State: Rural North China 1900–1942* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1988), pp. 6–7.

⁸ See, respectively, Minami Manshū Tetsudō Kabushiki Kaisha 南滿洲鐵道株式會社, *Dainiji Kitō nōson jittai chōsa hōkokusho, tōkeihen* 第二次冀東農村實態調查報告書, 統計篇 (Dalian, 1937): *Dai ichiban: Heikoku ken* 第一班, 平谷縣, table 9, pp. 48–51; *Daisanban, Hōjun ken* 第三班: 豐潤縣, table 9, pp. 53–56; *Dai yonban: Shōrei ken* 第四班: 昌黎縣, table 9, pp. 50–53; and idem (Tenshin jimusho chōsaka 天津事務所調查課), *Junka ken rokasai nōson jittai chōsa hōkoku* 遵化縣盧家寨農村實態調查報告 (Tianjin: 1936), pp. 116–20.

the donkey would spend one day at a time in each household, whose responsibility it was to feed it that day. Donkeys were fed *gaoliang* 高粱 (Chinese sorghum) and millet stalks (*sugan* 粟桿), and they were shod by the village blacksmith (usually six times per year, for the price of 0.15 *yuan* each time). The Mantetsu researchers observed the diverse roles of the animal in agricultural work: harnessed to plows, pulling grind-stones, turning water mills, and carrying fertilizer (including its own excrement). Considering its added significance in the transport of people and goods, they concluded that the donkey was the most important draft animal in the village.⁹

In life and death alike, the patiently suffering animal was fully exploited. In the northeastern Hebei village of Lujiashai, donkeys were usually employed for fifteen or sixteen years, after which they were sent to the knacker in the nearby town of Zuojiaiwu 左家塢. The slaughtered equine would be flayed, the skin sold for approximately one *yuan*, and the meat fetching 0.1 *yuan* per *jin* (one *jin* equaled approximately 1.1 pound). Considered effective in traditional Chinese medicine, the bones would be sent to Tangshan 唐山 city, retailing for two copper coins (*tongzi* 銅子) per *jin*.¹⁰ No part of the animal was left unused.

Donkey meat is consumed in north China to this day. In the capital, it has been in vogue for centuries. During the Ming period (1368–1644), one Beijing street was named “Donkey Meat Alley” (*Lü rou hutong* 驢肉衚衕), presumably after the eateries that served the delicacy (see map 2).¹¹ In his *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, Mo Yan quotes the popular proverb that praises the equine’s delicious taste: “Dragon meat in heaven, donkey meat on earth 天上的龍肉，地上的驢肉。” The twentieth-century novelist goes on to satirize the gluttonous officials that feed on the animal: “The commune’s Party cadres were ardent fans of cooked donkey, especially the newly arrived Party secretary, who had previously served as County Chief Chen’s secretary. His name was Fan Tong, which sounded just like the words for ‘rice bucket.’ He had an astonishing capacity for food...”¹²

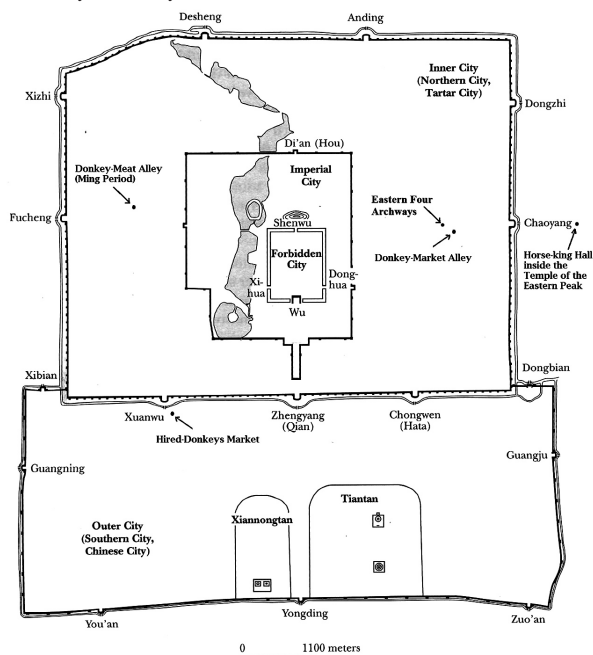
⁹ See *ibid.*, pp. 123–24. Huang (*Peasant Economy*, p. 150) argues that hogs surpassed equines as producers of fertilizer.

¹⁰ Minami Manshū Tetsudō Kabushiki Kaisha (Tenshin jimusho chōsaka), *Junka ken Roka-sai nōson jittai chōsa hōkoku*, pp. 123–24.

¹¹ To be sure, donkeys have been consumed in Europe as well. The practical disappearance, following World War II, of the powerful French breed known as Baudet de Poitou is attributed to its being eaten to extinction; see Bough, *Donkey*, p. 33.

¹² Mo, *Life and Death*, p. 110.

The Mantetsu reports leave no doubt that, in northern Chinese villages, the donkey was the most commonly used equine, followed in descending order by the mule and the horse. Conducted in Shandong province, two other Japanese surveys confirm the findings. Shortly after overtaking Qingdao from its German colonizers in 1914, Japanese researchers counted the draft animals in the city's agricultural hinterlands. They reported a total of 4,375 donkeys and mules (combined) as opposed to a mere 124 horses.¹³ Some twenty years later, in a veterinary survey, Kondo Masaichi and Terakado Yoshi estimated, for



Map 2. Donkey-Related Sites in Late-Imperial Beijing

the entire province, 2,000,000 donkeys, 600,000 mules and 250,000 horses.¹⁴ In Shandong, donkeys were thus ten times more numerous than their nobler relation, the horse.

The significance of the horse in the British economy is reflected in the term "horsepower," which was coined by James Watt (1736-1819) to compare the output of his steam

engine with the power of draft horses. By contrast, in North China productivity was measured in donkey units. The Mantetsu researchers reported that in Hebei and Shandong labor was calculated by means of donkeys. According to the peasants' rule of thumb, a horse equaled two (small) donkeys, a mule equaled 2 (small) donkeys, an ox equaled

¹³ The numbers are quoted in *Jiao'ao zhi* 膠澳志, comp. Yuan Rongsou 袁榮叟 et al. (1928 edn.), j. 5, pp. 2a-b.

¹⁴ Kondo Shoichi 近藤正一 and Terakado Yoshi 寺門賀, "Santoshou no nogyou go kachi-kueisei" 山東省の農業ご家畜衛生, *Ouyou juigaku zasshi* 應用獸醫學雜誌 11.12 (1938), pp. 37-42.

1.5 (small) donkeys, and a large donkey was likewise the equivalent of 1.5 (small) donkeys. The workforce required for any given task was measured by means of donkey units per day. For example 3 donkey units could mean either 3 donkeys, or 1 horse and 1 donkey, or 2 ox-equine was chosen as the tural productivity speaks nence in village life.

DONKEYS AND

The dependence equines was reflected animals' tutelary de-featured a divine pro-keys, and mules. Vari-Horse King (Mawang (Mashen 馬神), his cult all those whose liveli-his equine protégés: were harnessed to don-goods were carried by ry-men, who depended The equine deity ben-ous patronage of ment organs that the imperial pal-tem, and the mili-the Horse King within army bar-were fired in his

to one nineteenth-century gazetteer, the troops would go on the march only after worshipping the Horse God.¹⁵

In rural North China, where his equine patrons proliferated, the Horse King's cult flourished. In his 1948 survey of village temples in northern Hebei, Willem Grootaers discovered that the Horse King was among the most popular local divinities. The survey covered 115 villages, which were located around the small town of Xuanhua (ap-

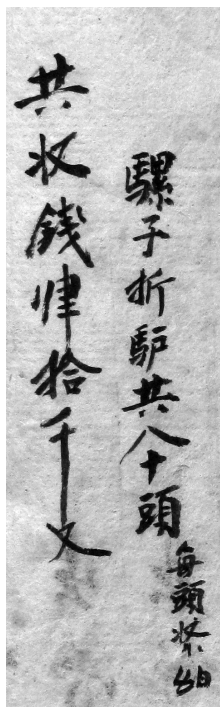


Figure 1. Entry from a Shanxi Horse King Temple Account-Book

Dated 1888. Villagers were expected to donate money to the temple in accordance with the number of equines they possessed, converted into donkeys.

THEIR GOD

of the village upon in the veneration of the ity. The popular religion tector of horses, don-ously known as the 馬王) or the Horse God was widespread among hood depended upon farmers whose plows keys; merchants whose pack mules; and caval-upon horses for warfare. efited from the gener-

the diverse govern-required horses for ace, the courier sys-tary. Temples for were often situated racks and canons honor. According

¹⁵ See above, n. 8; and Huang, *Peasant Economy*, p. 144 (table 8.4).

¹⁶ *Baoqing fu zhi* 寶慶府志 (1847 edn.), j. 87, p. 19b (Baoqing is in today's Hunan province). On the Horse King see Li Qiao 李喬, *Zhongguo hangye shen chongbai* 中國行業神崇拜 (Beijing: Zhongguo Huaqiao, 1990), pp. 295–303; on his derivation from the Horse-Headed

proximately a hundred miles northwest of Beijing). The Horse King was discovered to rank fourth in the number of cult units dedicated to him (56), preceded only by such locally (or nationally) famed deities as Wudao 五道 (88 units), the Dragon King (75 units), and the Bodhisattva Guanyin (60 units).¹⁷ My own preliminary survey of local gazetteers indicates a close correlation between the ecology of equine breeding and the cult of this tutelary deity. Horse King temples were prevalent in northern provinces (where horses, donkeys, and mules played a major role in agriculture and commerce). By contrast, his temples were fewer and far between in south China, where the water buffalo was the principal draft animal and river transportation flourished.¹⁸

To be sure, the presence of his temples in Northern Chinese villages does not indicate which of the Horse King's protégés – horses, donkeys, or mules – was the most prevalent. However, a remarkable document from a temple in Shanxi confirms the Hebei and Shandong Mantetsu surveys' finding that the villagers calculated labor by donkey units. In 2001, my friend Ye Derong 葉德榮 (A'de 阿德) purchased at a Beijing antique market a sachet of manuscripts from a Shanxi Horse-King temple. Recording its revenues and expenses over a hundred-year period (from 1852 through 1956), the manuscripts attest that donations to the temple were calculated in donkey equivalents. The villagers were expected to contribute to its upkeep in accordance with the number of equines they possessed, which were converted into donkey units. A typical entry in the Shanxi temple manuscript reads "the total number of horses, donkeys, and mules in the village, *converted into donkeys* 折驢, is [such and such]. For each head [such and such] a donation is required." Dating from the 14th year of the Guangxu reign (1888), the example reproduced in figure 1 (see verso) reads: "The total number of mules [and donkeys], *converted into donkeys*, is eighty. For each head,

Avalokiteśvara (Guanyin) see Meir Shahr, "The Tantric Origins of the Horse King: Hayagrīva and the Chinese Horse Cult," in Yael Bentor and Meir Shahr, eds., *Chinese and Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 147–89.

¹⁷ By "cult unit," Grootaers means either a temple that is dedicated to the god or his shrine within another god's temple; see Willem Grootaers, Li Shih-Yü 李世瑜, and Wang Fu-Shih 王輔世, "Rural Temples around Hsüan-Hua (South Chahar), Their Iconography and Their History," *Folklore Studies* 10.1 (1951), pp. 54–57; compare Grootaers' earlier survey of rural temples around the town of Wanquan (approximately 110 miles northwest of Beijing), in which the Horse King ranked sixth in number of shrines; see Willem Grootaers, Li Shi-Yü 李世瑜, and Chang Chi-Wen 張翼文, "Temples and History of Wanch'üan (Chahar): The Geographical Method Applied to Folklore," *MS* 13 (1948), pp. 254–57.

¹⁸ My very rough estimate of the relative prevalence of Horse King temples in diverse provinces is based on the Erudition (Airusheng 愛如生) database of local histories (first collection [*chujī* 初集]). I counted the number of references to Horse King temples 廟 and shrines 祠 as well as – using the deity's other name – Horse God (Mashen 馬神) temples and shrines. I

five hundred should be received. The total revenues amount to forty thousand copper coins 騾子折驢共八十頭，每頭收五百，共收錢四十千文。” Judging by this entry, in 1888 there were no horses in the village, whose economy depended solely upon donkeys and mules.¹⁹

WHY DONKEYS?

Why were donkeys so prevalent in the Chinese countryside? The answers are suggested by Republican-period local histories (*difang zhi* 地方志), some of which contain elaborate expositions on the relative merits of equines. Consider, for example, the following tribute to the donkey from the 1940 *Gazetteer of Sha'he County* (in Southern Hebei Province):

The donkey is smaller than the horse. Its head is large and elongated. Its mane is short and straight. Its chest is somewhat narrow. The back is covered with bristles of stiff hair. The donkey comes in various colors – black, white, grey, and brown, often with black stripes on its back. Its tail is short, and is covered with thick, long, hair.

The donkey's physique is sturdy. It is endowed with patience and endurance. If trained in accordance with its nature, the donkey is docile. If one goes against it, the animal grows contrary. The donkey is easily tamed, and even with minimum care it rarely falls ill. The female (jenny) is called *caolü* 草驢; the male (jack) is known as *jiaolü* 叫驢.

The donkey does all sorts of labor. Its tasty meat is edible. Its hide and hair are likewise useful. In the western part of our County, donkeys are universally reared as pack animals. Even poor peasants 普通小農戶 commonly raise donkeys, which far exceed oxen and mules in number.²⁰

Other local histories similarly highlighted the qualities that accounted for the donkey's prominence: the draft animal could be used

arrived at these per-province totals: Shandong (366 references), Hebei (353), Shanxi (202), Shaanxi (218), Zhejiang (29), Fujian (54), Jiangxi (83), Taiwan (5). The figures should not be taken as indicative of the actual number of temples in each province (because only so many temples make it into the gazetteers and because gazetteers count the same temples over and over again.) Nonetheless, the figures might provide a tentative indication of the relative prevalence of Horse King temples in different provinces.

¹⁹ The temple was situated in Dengcun 鄧村 village, Xiangfen 襄汾 county (southern Shanxi), as we verified during fieldwork on September 21, 2016.

²⁰ *Shahe xian zhi* 沙河縣志, comp. Wang Yansheng 王延升, ed. Lin Qingyang 林清揚 (1940 edn.), j. 7, p. 10b.

for agriculture as well as transportation. It was capable of negotiating mountainous as well flat terrains. It was edible, and its hide useful. The donkey was inexpensive to purchase and its maintenance costs were low (as it was fed small quantities of coarse fodder). It was easily tamed and, furthermore, was hardy and resilient, even under extreme weather conditions.²¹ (We might add that the donkey was well suited to the arid China plains, having a lower water requirement per unit of weight than any other animal other than the camel.)²² Specific donkey breeds were sometimes singled out for praise: “The donkey is extremely tame and easily reared. There is hardly a farming family that does not raise one,” noted the 1934 gazetteer of Mizhi county (northern Shaanxi). “The best stock is known as Four Black Brows (Heisimei 黑四眉).”²³

Whereas “hardly a farming family did not raise a donkey,” horses were rather rare. The noblest of equines emerges from the Republican-period gazetteers as a delicate and capricious creature, requiring for its upkeep elaborate training and constant care. “The horse is by nature too violent 馬性過暴,” laments a 1929 gazetteer of Xinjiang county (southern Shanxi). “If it does not receive proper care, the horse develops evil traits,” concurs the 1940 Shahe county gazetteer. “Furthermore, it is susceptible to disease. Therefore the common people rarely keep horses.”²⁴ Although it was the strongest of equines, the horse’s high maintenance costs and vulnerability made it impractical for the common farmer.

The donkey’s ability to climb narrow mountain paths was often cited as an advantage over its kin. The 1928 gazetteer of Qingdao (Shandong) attributed the peninsula’s abundance of donkeys (and mules) – as contrasted with its scarcity of horses – to the rugged topography.²⁵ Works of fiction likewise depicted the donkey’s suitability to mountainous terrain. Liu E’s 劉鶚 (1857–1909) *Travels of Lao Can* 老殘遊記 tells of a government official who, arriving at a steep mountain range, exchanges his inadequate horse for an expedient donkey. In a loving memoir of his native Beijing, H. Y. Lowe (Lu Xingyuan 盧興源) recalled

²¹ Compare, for example, *Jiao’ao zhi*, j. 5, pp. 2a–b; and *Mizhi xian zhi* 米脂縣志, comp. Yan Jianzhang 嚴建章 and Gao Zhaochu 高照初 (1934 edn.), j. 7, p. 3a.

²² Bough, *Donkey*, p. 26.

²³ *Mizhi xian zhi* 米脂縣志, comp. Yan Jianzhang 嚴建章 and Gao Zhaochu 高照初 (1934 edn.), j. 7, p. 3a. The Heisimei is a sub-breed of the Jiami 佳米 donkey, so named after the northern Shaanxi counties of Jiaxian 佳縣 and Mizhi xian 米脂縣, which excelled in its breeding; see *Zhongguo ma lü pinzhong zhi* 中國馬驢品種志, ed. Xie Chengxia 謝成俠 et al. (Shanghai: Shanghai kexue jishu, 1987), pp. 118–21.

²⁴ See respectively, *Xinjiang xian zhi* 新絳縣志, comp. Yang Zhaotai 楊兆泰, ed. Xu Zhaojian 徐昭儉 (1929 edn.), j. 3, p. 8a; and *Shahe xian zhi* 沙河縣志, j. 7, p. 10b.

²⁵ *Jiao’ao zhi*, j. 5, pp. 2a–b.

the donkeys that hauled water jars for the thirsty pilgrims ascending the sacred Miaofeng 妙峰 Mountain.²⁶

The cross of the horse with the donkey combined their favorable traits. Benefitting from *heterosis* or “hybrid vigor,” the mule was as strong as the horse and as resilient as the donkey. Hence it was universally lauded by Republican-period authors. “The mule has inherited the beneficial qualities of both horse and donkey,” noted the 1936 gazetteer of Dongping county (Shandong province). “It is strong. It gallops fast, and it labors without being fatigued. Furthermore, it is immune to disease, enjoying the longest lifespan.”²⁷ The 1940 gazetteer of Shahe county was similarly enthusiastic about the hybrid animal: “The mule is not averse to coarse feed, and it can carry heavy weights over long distances. Neither the horse nor the donkey is its equal.”²⁸ “Bronze mule, iron donkey, paper horse 銅騾鐵驢紙糊馬” went the Shaanxi adage, reflecting the popular conception of the mule as the sturdiest – and the horse as the most vulnerable – of equines.²⁹

If the mule was the preferred equine, it was also the most expensive. The production of the hybrid required the presence of a male donkey (jack) and a female horse (mare), the mating of which was not always easily accomplished.³⁰ According to the 1928 gazetteer of Qingdao (Shandong), the average price of a mule ranged from 17 to 50 *yuan*, whereas a horse fetched between 9 and 30 *yuan*. Donkeys were the cheapest, their price ranging from 6 to 25.³¹ Thus, these were usually “affluent households 有力之家” that kept mules.³² Judging by early-twentieth-century local histories, the hybrid was the most expensive of equines, followed in descending order by the horse and the donkey. The latter was the most widely used of equines, after which came the mule and finally the horse.

²⁶ See respectively, Liu T'ieh-Yün, *The Travels of Lao Ts'an*, trans. Harold Shadick (Ithaca: Cornell U.P., 1952), p. 89; and H. Y. Lowe, *The Adventures of Wu: The Life Cycle of a Peking Man*, introduction by Derk Bodde (1940; rpt. Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1983) 1, p. 88.

²⁷ *Dongping xian zhi* 東平縣志, comp. Liu Jingyu 劉靖宇 et al. (1936 edn.), j. 4, p. 27b.

²⁸ *Shahe xian zhi*, j. 7, p. 11a.

²⁹ Quoted in Zhang Ping 張萍, “Qingdai Shaanxi nongcun xuyangye de fazhan yu shengchu chanpin shuchu” 清代陝西農村畜養的發展與牲畜產品輸出, *Zhongguo lishi dili luncong* 中國歷史地理論叢 24.3 (July 2009), p. 54. It is noteworthy that mules were the preferred pack animals in southwest China as well; see Ma Jianxiong and Ma Cunzhao, “The Mule Caravans of Western Yunnan: An Oral History of the Muleteers of Zhaozhou,” *Transfers* 4.3 (Winter 2014), pp. 24–42. In the early twentieth century, the British Army imported mules from China to India (James Hevia, personal communication, January 2017).

³⁰ The hinny (Chinese: *luluo* 驢騾), being the cross of a female donkey (jenny) and a male horse (stallion), was not as robust as the mule, and hence not as favored.

³¹ *Jiao'ao zhi* 膠澳志, comp. Yuan Rongsou 袁榮姝 et al. (1928 edn.), j. 5, pp. 2a–b.

³² See *Shahe xian zhi*, j. 7, p. 11a.

The use of donkeys (and mules) as pack animals created a link between local and regional economies. During slack seasons, when they were not required in the fields, the equines would be exploited for transportation. When they did not pull ploughs or turn mill-stones, the draft animals would haul merchandise within or across county, prefectural, and provincial boundaries. A detailed account is provided by the 1934 gazetteer of Jingxing county (southern Hebei). Here, the agricultural and industrial spheres were joined by equine labor, as donkeys and mules were driven by the peasants to transport coal from the local mines:

In the northern and western sections of our county, the farming families have always kept one or two donkeys or mules. When not employed in the fields the equines haul coal and charcoal to the neighboring Huolu 獲鹿 and Pingshan 平山 counties, or else they ply the roads within the county itself, to villages that are situated far from the local mines.

Purchasing the coal requires one day, and selling it yet another. The roundtrip lasts two days. This is known as a “short haul 短脚.” Those engaged in this line of work suffer tremendous hardships for a tiny profit. Nevertheless, they are obliged to make a living. They have no choice!

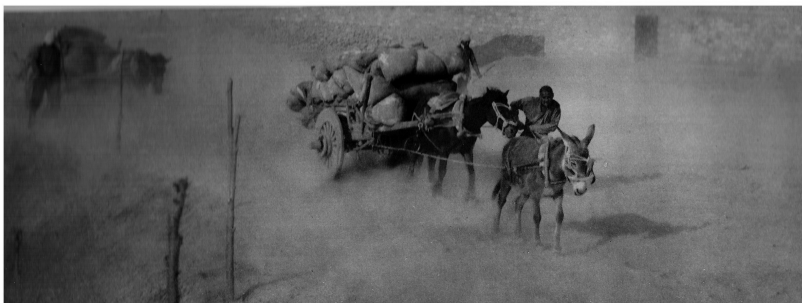
There are those among the peasants who keep quite a few mules, transporting cargo and passengers to Beijing [in the north] or Shanxi [in the west]. The roundtrip lasts over a dozen days, or even several dozen days. This is known as “running the long route 跑長路.” The profit is somewhat larger than that of the “short haul,” but the hardships endured are also proportionally bigger. The local people refer to this line of work as “driving draft animals 趕牲口.” It is the hardest – and most common – occupation.³³

Photographic evidence attests just how hard the work of the donkey driver was. Pictures taken by the amateur Scottish photographer Donald Mennie (lived ca. 1875–1941) reveal the daunting conditions under which the beasts of burden and their owners struggled. Taken in and around Beijing at the beginning of the twentieth century, the photos show donkeys and horses pulling impossibly heavy carts through the billowing dust of the north China plains. Oftentimes the road was practically nonexistent, and the primitive harness made life for the animal miserable. The long traces were meant to give the leading equine

³³ *Jingxing xian zhiliao* 井陘縣志料, comp. Fu Rufeng 傅汝鳳 et al. (1934 edn.), j. 6, p. 12a.

firm footing when the heavily loaded vehicle bogged down in the mud (figures 2, 3, and 4).

Mennie's photos furnish an extraordinary record of daily life in early-twentieth-century China. Published in an elegant volume in 1920, they were accompanied by insightful notes written by his colleague S.



♪ *Figure 2. Donkey and Horse Struggling with Heavy Cartload*
Environs of Beijing, ca. 1910. Photo by Mennie, Pageant of Peking (cited n. 34), pl. 24.



☞ *Figure 3. Donkey and Horse Pulling Heavy Cart*
Near Xizhi Men, Beijing. Photo ca. 1910 by Mennie, Pageant of Peking, pl. 20.

Figure 4. Pack Donkeys ☞
Nearby Nankou guan, some 25 miles northwest of Beijing. Photo ca. 1910, by Mennie, Pageant of Peking, pl. 26.



Couling, who commented, apropos figure 2: “The heavy cart with its load of bursting sacks, the hard-worked animals with their crude harness and the suffering drivers all deserve close inspection by those who wish to know what life in China is like.” As for the convoy of pack animals (figure 4), it elicited wonder about the very possibility of donkey-driven commerce: “A glance at the picture teaches us a good deal about the difficulties of native trade. A donkey cannot carry many hundred-weights, and when the cost of goods is increased by the cost of fodder for many days and by the driver’s wages it seems wonderful there should be any carrying trade at all.”³⁴

Donkeys remained ubiquitous all through the second half of the century. In 1971, the United Nations Food and Drug Administration calculated that there were more burros in China than in any other country. It estimated the figure of 11,622,000 Chinese donkeys, out of a total world population



Figure 5. “One Donkey Is One Small Bank”

This is a slogan on a village wall; environs of Fuxin, Liaoning province. Photo taken 2012 by Gideon Shelach-Lavi.

of 42,700,000.³⁵ In 2012, my friend Gideon Shelach-Lavi spotted in a small Liaoning village a billboard reading “One donkey is one small bank” (figure 5). The socialist-style slogan captures the centrality of the donkey in rural north China. For many peasants, the humble equine was their sole capital, the death of which might herald bankruptcy. The donkey has been the motor of agricultural production, on which the villager’s livelihood depends.

³⁴ Donald Mennie, *The Pageant of Peking: Comprising Sixty-Six Vandyck Photogravures of Peking and Environs*, introduction by Putnam Weale, descriptive notes by S. Couling (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, 1920), notes to plates 24 and 26.

³⁵ The *FAO 1971 Production Yearbook*, cited in Brookshier, *Burro*, p. 149.

EQUINE MARKERS OF STATUS

Across the globe, people's mounts signaled their social standing. Much as an expensive car is a mark of affluence, the rich of former generations flaunted their wealth by their pedigreed equines. Whereas the peasantry was usually borne by donkeys, the aristocracy – in George Elliot's (1819–1880) apt words – “rode off its ennui on thoroughbred horses.”³⁶ The emblematic significance of the horse and the donkey is most famously illustrated by the proverbial Don Quixote and his squire Sancho Panza. The former rides the emaciated mare Rocinante, whereas the latter follows on a donkey. The master and his servant have been appointed by Cervantes (1547–1616) with mounts proper to their station.

Medieval China, like Renaissance Spain, considered the horse a mark of nobility. A short story by the eighth-century Shen Jiji 沈既濟 has a Lord Governor and his dependent ride through the capital's pleasure quarter. The Lord mounts a white steed, and his poor relation gets by with a donkey.³⁷ By the late-imperial period, however, horses were so rare that the equine trope lost some of its edge. I suggest that, by the sixteenth century, almost everyone – including members of the literati elite – rode donkeys (or mules). To be sure, the affluent gentry possessed horses (as did the imperial court). However, its womenfolk were borne by the horse's humbler relations, as were many of its men. For all strata of late imperial society, donkeys, mules (and the carts they pulled) far surpassed horses as means of locomotion.

Unlike our knowledge of the Republican period, we possess no statistics of Ming and Qing period draft animals. My claim for the relative prevalence of donkeys and mules over horses derives from works of fiction. The impression gained from vernacular novels – and short stories in the classical idiom – is of a donkey-riding society. To be sure, the evidence of fiction might be questioned. Nonetheless, in the absence of other sources, it ought not to be offhandedly discarded. Here are a few examples:

Dating from the mid-nineteenth century, *The Heroic Maiden* (*Ernü yingxiong zhuan* 兒女英雄傳) combines the charms of romance with the thrill of martial-art fiction. Its literati protagonist is the son of a righteous official who has been unjustly imprisoned. The filial offspring gathers funds and sets on a journey to ransom his father. For the pur-

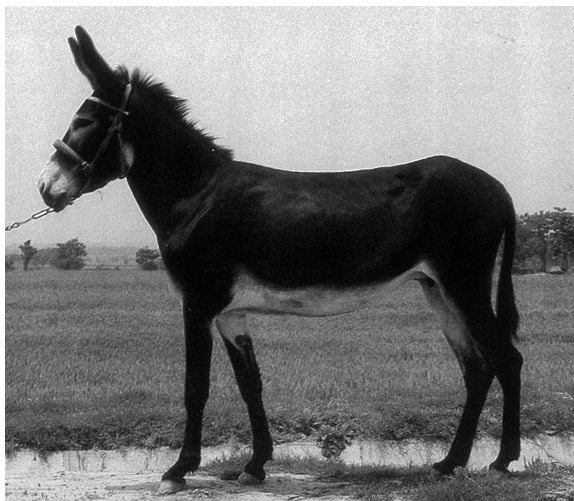
³⁶ George Elliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 296.

³⁷ Shen Jiji, “Renshi zhuan” 任氏傳 (“Ren's Story”), trans. Stephen Owen, *An Anthology of Chinese Literature, Beginning to 1911* (New York: Norton, 1991), pp. 518–19.

pose, he hires “long-distance mules 長行騾子,” only to have the mule-drivers 騾夫 rob him midway. As helpless as are most official scions in Chinese fiction, the youth is saved by a ravishing martial artist – his future wife. Herself daughter of a wronged military commander, the heroic maiden appears on the scene riding a black burro. The author waxes eloquent on the beauty of her draft animal which, judging by its detailed description, might have been of the breed known as Guanzhong Donkey (Guanzhong lü 關中驢) (see figure 6):

What a fine little donkey! Jet black as if coated with ink! Yet its earlobes, eye-sockets, chest and underbelly are snowy-white, as is the tip of its tail. Furthermore, its four hoofs sparkle like silver, and the crown of its head shines white as jade. It is absolutely perfect! How extraordinary! Enthusiastic admirers won't be able to purchase it on the market even for 200 strings of cash!³⁸

The protagonists of *Heroic Maiden* belong to the literati elite, she being a martial artist to boot. Nonetheless, they both ride donkeys (or mules): horses do not figure in the novel. This is also the case in the brutal satire of Chinese family life titled *Bonds of Matrimony* (*Xingshi yinyuan* 醒世姻緣, ca. 1700). The novel has a sadistic upper-class lady torture her miserable husband (who has been recently appointed to the Imperial Academy). In one episode, the two join a group of female devotees on a pilgrimage to the sacred Mount Tai. The women all ride donkeys, as



does our termagant. The pilgrimage serving the added function of punishment for him, she forces her spouse to serve as her groom. Wielding a whip, she has him stumble in his schol-

Figure 6. Guanzhong Donkey
From *Zhongguo ma li pinzhong zhi* (cited n. 23), photo 36.

³⁸ Wen Kang 文康, *Ernü yingxiong zhuan* 兒女英雄傳 (Taipei: Sanmin shuju, 1983), chap. 4, p. 37. The reference to the “long-distance mules” is in chap. 3, p. 30.

arly cap and gown, as he goes on foot, leading her donkey up the mountain.³⁹

The Dream of the Red Chamber (*Honglou meng* 紅樓夢, ca. 1760) depicts a family at the very apex of Chinese society. The protagonists of the greatest Chinese novel enjoy fabulous wealth, being related by marriage to the emperor. The men ride horses, but their noble wives are borne by carriages that are harnessed to “tame mules 馴騾.”⁴⁰ Male members of the family’s collateral branches ride donkeys. One episode has a distant cousin appointed supervisor of the clan’s temple and its resident clerics. Delighted with his new position, he spends his first-earned salary on a burro: “He had a boy to carry the money back home for him, and after taking counsel with his mother he hired a stout little donkey for himself to ride on and four of five covered mule carts for the nuns... ”⁴¹

Vernacular and classical fiction alike indicates that merchants, shopkeepers, and various other urban professionals rode donkeys or drove mule-drawn carts. A short story by Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640–1715) has a flower vendor ride a burro. Ji Yun 紀昀 (1724–1805), for his part, tells of merchants traveling in a convoy of mules 騾綱.⁴² The *Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Jin ping mei* 金瓶梅, ca. 1580) has a physician who rides a donkey to call on his patients. The sixteenth-century novel elaborates on its protagonist’s change in the means of transportation: originally he conducted his home visits by foot. However, a lucrative marriage enabled him to purchase the draft animal.⁴³ Here we can de-

³⁹ *Xingshi yinyuan* 醒世姻緣, author given as Xizhou Sheng 西周生 (Taiebi: Lianjing, 1986), chap. 68, p. 850 to chap. 69, p. 851; trans. Glen Dudbridge, “Women Pilgrims to Tai Shan,” in Susan Naquin and Chün-Fang Yü, eds., *Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China* (Berkeley: U. California P., 1992), pp. 51–53. Elsewhere the novel weaves the patient animal into a harrowing tale of cannibalism. During a raging famine, a licentiate (*xiucai* 秀才) sends his only son to buy rice. The donkey-riding youth ends up being cooked in the same pot with his mount, having been slaughtered en route by starving peasants (*Xingshi yinyuan*, chap. 31, pp. 402–3).

⁴⁰ Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 and Gao E 高鶚, *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 (Beijing: Zuoja, 1957), chap. 3, p. 26. The principal male protagonist, Baoyu, rides a horse, see chap. 19, p. 186.

⁴¹ This is David Hawkes’s translation, *The Story of the Stone* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), vol. 1, p. 455; the original is Cao and Gao, *Honglou meng*, chap. 23, p. 227 (variant reading no. 6).

⁴² See, respectively, Pu Songling 蒲松齡, “Huangying” 黃英, in his *Liaozhai zhiyi huijiao* 聊齋志異會校會注會評本, ed. Zhang Youhe 張友鶴 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1986), j. 11, p. 1446; and Ji Yun 紀昀, “Guwang ting zhi yi” 姑妄聽之一, in his *Yuewei caotang biji* 閱微草堂筆記, ed. Wang Xiandu 汪賢度 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1980), j. 15, p. 385. In Pu’s stories, the literati likewise ride donkeys, which are sometimes referred to in the classical idiom as *wei* 衛; see his “Yingning” 嬰寧, j. 2, p. 154.

⁴³ *Jin Ping Mei cihua* 金瓶梅詞話, author given as Lanling Xiaoxiao sheng 蘭陵笑笑生 (Hong Kong: Mengmei Guan, 1993), chap. 17, p. 193; and David Roy’s translation, *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1993) 1, p. 335.

tect a measure of mockery directed towards the poor doctor. The physician who swaggers on his newly acquired donkey is contrasted with a horse-riding neighbor, who would eventually rob him of his wife. The donkey and the horse serve in this instance – as they do in *Don Quixote* – as markers of social and economic standing. It is the fate of the pathetic donkey rider to be humiliated by his romantic rival, a dissipated cavalryman who wields wealth and power. Indeed, despite their indebtedness to his labor, the Chinese – like their European counterparts – have often associated the donkey with poverty and stubbornness, even stupidity. The Chinese *lū* 驢, like its English equivalents “donkey” and “ass,” figures in vernacular fiction as a term of abuse. Perhaps because it rhymes with *tu* 秃 (bald), it has been customary to hurl the insult at Buddhist monks. In the Ming-period *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳), the fighting monk Lu Zhishen is cursed by his defeated adversaries as a “bald ass” (*tulū* 秃驢).⁴⁴

Smaller and humbler than the horse, it has been the fate of the donkey to be mocked and ridiculed. Across cultures, the poor creature has suffered from comparison with its handsome kin. In Europe, the Middle East, India, and China alike, the donkey is unjustly accused of obstinacy and incompetence, his very name an insult.⁴⁵ The negative attributes of the draft animal extend to the sexual realm. Unlike the horse, whose stamina is a metaphor for masculinity (consider the English word “stud” meaning both a stallion kept for breeding and a virile young man), the donkey’s large penis symbolizes ludicrous sexuality. In the sixteenth-century erotic tale “Lord of Perfect Satisfaction” (*Ruyi jun zhuan* 如意君傳), the massive instrument of the protagonist Ao Cao is compared to that of a donkey. The unflattering allusion is made by the spiteful rivals of his mistress, Empress Wu Zetian.⁴⁶ In the roughly contemporaneous *Plum in the Golden Vase*, the animal stands for an insatiable carnal appetite. A slave who makes love to his master’s concubine is likened to an ass. The metaphor reaches its climax when the paramour ejaculates: “Almost before they know it, a glob of donkey’s spunk has been deposited in Jinlian’s jade-like body.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ *Shuihu quanzhuan* 水滸全傳, authors given as Shi Nai’an 施耐庵 and Luo Guanzhong 羅貫中 (Taipei: Wannianqing shudian, 1979), chapter 5, pp. 87, 90; compare Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646), *Jingshi tongyan* 警世通言, ed. Yan Dunyi 嚴敦義 (Beijing: Renmin wuxue, 1991), chap. 5, p. 54, chap. 7, p. 87.

⁴⁵ On the derogatory connotations of the English “donkey” and “ass” (partially deriving from the association with “ass” in its meaning as human buttocks), see Bough, *Donkey*, pp. 12–13.

⁴⁶ *Ruyi jun zhuan* 如意君傳 (anon., 16th c.), author now given as Xu Changling 徐昌齡 (Taipei: Taiwan daying baike, 1995), p. 55; trans. Charles R. Stone, *The Fountainhead of Chinese Erotica: The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction* (Honolulu: Hawaii U.P., 2003), p. 147.

⁴⁷ This is David Roy’s translation, *Plum in the Golden Vase*, vol. 1, p. 233; the original is

The rarity of horses – compared to the prevalence of their humbler kin – is suggested by the celebration of imaginary ones. In “The Painted Horse” (“Hua ma” 畫馬), Pu Songling tells of a poverty-stricken youth who discovers a thoroughbred dapple in his front yard. Mounting the stallion, he rides hundreds of miles in order to sell it to the Prince of Jin. The proceeds enable him to purchase – among other luxuries – a mule, which he rides back home, only to discover that he has been pursued by the prince’s envoys. The pedigreed horse has escaped and returned to its rightful owner – for it was originally a horse’s image painted by the renowned artist Chen Ziang 陳子昂 (659–700) that hung at a neighboring mansion. The flesh and blood mule of Pu Songling’s own day is contrasted with the fanciful steed of the Tang dynasty (618–907). The horse is no more than a trope of a golden age, in which it had been common.⁴⁸

The hardships of donkey travel are faithfully rendered in an early-twentieth-century novel by Liu E 劉鶚 (1857–1909). The *Travels of Lao Can* features a government official who ascends a snow-covered mountain on the draft animal’s back. The donkey-riding official and his attendants arrive at a narrow stone bridge, which is suspended over a deep gorge. Faced by the ice-covered foot-wide bridge, “the donkey would rather die than cross. The [attendants] wasted a lot of time and in the end had to cover his eyes, and one man pulling, another beating, they at last bundled him across somehow.”⁴⁹

Riding donkeys (or mules), travelers were at the mercy of the animal’s driver, who was commonly referred to as *zhangbian* 掌鞭 (literally, whip-wielder). The memoirs of the literati-elite betray a suspicion of grooms quite similar to the apprehension of present-day tourists lest they be cheated by local cab-drivers. In a bitter ditty titled “Ode to the Whip-Wielders,” the phonologist Chen Di 陳第 (1541–1617) denounced his grooms as a violent breed of good-for-nothings: “The mule-drivers give orders left and right as they please,...Swaggering idlers, what can be done about them?”⁵⁰ The traitorous groom was a favorite figure of late-imperial fiction. In the above-mentioned *Heroic Maiden*, the pro-

Jin Ping Mei Cihua, chap. 12, p. 127. In India, the donkey has been associated with sexual voraciousness (and disease); see Fabrizio M. Ferrari, “The Silent Killer: The Ass as Personification of Illness in North Indian Folklore,” in Fabrizio Ferrari and Thomas Dähnhardt, eds., *Charming Beauties and Frightful Beasts: Non-Human Animals in South Asian Myth, Ritual, and Folklore* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013), pp. 236–57.

⁴⁸ Pu, “Hua ma,” in his *Liaozhai zhiyi*, j. 8, pp. 1027–28.

⁴⁹ Liu, *Travels of Lao Ts’an*, p. 89.

⁵⁰ Chen Di 陳第, *Wuyue you cao* 五嶽遊草 (Siku quanshu cunmu congshu edn.; Hong Kong: Zhungyuan wenhua shiye, 1997), j. 2, p. 20b.

tagonist is robbed by his mule-drivers; whereas the late-Ming *Words to Mold the World* (*Xingshi yan* 型世言, ca. 1630) has its hero fall prey to a donkey-driver. As he helps his client into the saddle, the groom gropes for the valuables hidden on his person. Leading the donkey to a desolate spot, he whips it violently. The pained animal throws the passenger off its back, whereupon the driver robs him of his belongings.⁵¹

Traitorous donkey-drivers were matched by crafty donkey-thieves. Anecdotal literature celebrated daring bandits who robbed passengers of their draft animal in broad daylight. In “The Devious Donkey Gang,” Xu Ke 徐珂 (1869–1928) marveled at the sleight of hand that enabled thieves to steal his mount from under the rider’s bottom:

Jubao is Nanjing’s southern gate. Grand and deep, it is surmounted by gorgeous watchtowers. Roads fanning from it in all directions, the gate is jam-packed with travelers, who swarm together like ants. It is an ideal place for thieves and pickpockets to practice their art.

One day, a peasant woman rode her donkey into the city. Following on foot, her husband wielded the whip. Arriving at the middle of the deep gate-tunnel, they were separated by the crushing mob. The husband could see his wife, but he could not reach her. Swept along, the woman was approached by men carrying large heavy sacks, who pressed upon her from both sides. After a while, when the crowd thinned, she suddenly found herself on the ground. She was still seated in the saddle, her feet in the stirrups. But the donkey was gone. Her husband hurried forward to support her. When he asked her what had happened, she had no idea.

Such criminal types are in fact quite common. Spotting a pricey donkey, they secretly send for their gang. They press on the rider left and right so that he can’t move. Waiting for the appropriate moment, they slash the bridle and saddle ropes. Two persons lift saddle and rider, even as they stab the donkey with an awl so that it sprints forward. When it is safely gone, they drop the rider to the ground and escape.

Needless to say, seeing his wife on the ground, the husband was concerned for her safety. It did not occur to him to pursue the bandits, who were already long gone.⁵²

⁵¹ Lu Renlong 陸人龍, *Xingshi yan* 型世言 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji, 1993), chap. 9, pp. 137–38.

⁵² Xu Ke 徐珂, *Qing bai lei chao* 清稗類鈔 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1986), vol. 11, pp. 5369–70.

Toiling donkeys figure in the visual arts no less than in classical literature. The draft animal appears alike in the elegant paintings of the literati elite and in folk art. Judging by their elongated ears, donkeys (or mules) serve as pack animals in Fan Kuan's 范寬 (ca. 950-ca. 1031) magnificent landscapes (figure 7). Unlike Donald Mennie's photographs, which have the beasts struggling against the elements in a harsh environment, here the tiny humans and their equines journey amidst the idyllic scene of majestic peaks and gushing streams. Postdating Fan Kuan's masterpiece by a millennium, peasant paintings of the Cultural Revolution era (1966–1976) feature the same draft animals. Titled “Yellow-Earth Love” (“Huangtu Qing” 黃土情), a naive watercolor by Zhang Qingyi 張青義 of Hu county (Shaanxi province) has a handsome youth follow on foot this donkey-riding beloved (figure 8).⁵³



Figure 7. “Travelers among Mountains and Streams”

Detail of the work by Fan Kuan (ca. 950-ca. 1031); photo courtesy of National Palace Museum (Taipei).

Figure 8. “Yellow Earth Love”
Peasant painting by Zhang Qingyi; 1960s.



⁵³ I purchased the painting from Mr. Ding Jitang 丁濟堂, who was among the first art teachers in Hu county; see *Zhongguo Huxian nongmin hua* 中國戶縣農民畫, ed. Wang Xiping 王西平 and Gao Congyi 高從宜 (Xian: Shaanxi lüyou, 2008), pp. 18–19.

The enchanting picture of innocent love accords with the historical records of newlyweds being borne on donkeys to the homes of their fiancées. The 1802 gazetteer of Yan'an prefecture (Shaanxi province) tells us that "in the city, the bride is carried to the groom's house in a sedan-chair, whereas in the countryside she is led riding a donkey."⁵⁴

THE CITY

Nineteenth-century European fiction portrays a combination of short-distance animal-driven transport with long-distance engine-powered travel. Anna Karenina rides the train from Moscow to Saint Petersburg, where her husband picks her up in a horse-drawn carriage; Sherlock Holmes hurries his coachman to catch the train at Paddington Station. Horses supplied traction for inner-city transportation even as they were replaced by steam-engines for long-distance travel. Historians have noted the "curious paradox that literally until the end of the [nineteenth] century, there was no improvement in inner-city transit that came close to matching the most advanced transportation of the age."⁵⁵

Horses dominated the streetscape of European and North American cities well into the first decade of the twentieth century. The affluent rode privately owned carriages (of which, in 1891, there were no fewer than 23,000 in London alone),⁵⁶ whereas the middle class took advantage of horse-driven public transportation. Teams of two, three, or four horses pulled omnibuses and trams along fixed routes, charging low fares. By 1899, the Parisian Compagnie Générale des Omnibus employed over 17,000 horses.⁵⁷ The breeding, grooming, feeding, shoeing, and trapping out of equines were a major source of urban employment. With 80,000 horses trotting the streets of their beautiful city, some 50,000 Parisians were engaged in horse-related business.⁵⁸ They included coachmen (and coach-women), grooms, traders, farriers, saddlers, wheelwrights, and veterinarians.

⁵⁴ *Jiaqing chongxiu Yan'an fu zhi* 嘉慶重修延安府志 (1802 edn.), comp. Hong Hui 洪蕙, j. 40, p. 2b. The same practice is recorded in the Republican-period gazetteer of Bao'an 保安 county, quoted in Zhang Ping, "Qingdai Shaanxi nongcun xuyangye," p. 53.

⁵⁵ Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 2014), p. 304.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ghislaine Bouchet, *Le cheval à Paris de 1850 à 1914*, Mémoires et documents de l'école des chartes 37 (Genève-Paris: Librairie Droz, 1993), p. 89.

⁵⁸ Bouchet, *Le cheval à Paris*, pp. 45, 129; see also Clay McShane and Joel A. Tarr, *The Horse in the City: Living Machines in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: John Hopkins U.P., 2007); and Bernadette Lizet, *Le cheval dans la vie quotidienne* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1996).

Ubiquitous in European and North American cities, horses were rather rare in Chinese ones. Human traction was one reason: the Chinese elites were often borne by sedan chairs (later replaced by man-pulled rickshaws). Another reason – which concerns us here – was the prevalence of donkeys. Outnumbered by burros in the countryside, horses were similarly few in the metropolitan areas. Zhang Zeduan's 張擇端 (fl. 1120) celebrated picture of the Northern Song capital Bianliang (present-day Kaifeng) might illustrate the point. Known as *Qingming shanghe tu* 清明上河圖 (*Along the River during the Qingming Festival*), the 17-foot painted scroll furnishes a remarkably detailed account of twelfth-century daily life, in which human muscle and donkey traction outstrip the horse in significance. In the scroll's central section of the Rainbow Bridge, within a bustling pedestrian crowd, we perceive one porter pushing a wheelbarrow (bottom left), three shoulder-pole carriers (bottom), and two sedan-chair bearers (center); then there is a donkey rider (center) and four pack burros (bottom and top); finally there are two horsemen, identified as officials by their headgear (figure 9). All in all, humans and donkeys appear to play a greater role than horses in urban transport.

Our survey of the donkey in works of fiction has touched upon its significance in the life of the urban elites. Below are a few additional sources attesting its prominence in the cityscape. The examples chosen concern the greatest of all Chinese cities – Beijing. To be sure, there was no lack of horses in the capital, where the imperial stables alone counted hundreds of steeds. Nonetheless, the combined evidence of gazetteers, anecdotal literature, memoirs, paintings, and photographs suggests that in the city's quotidian life the donkey rivaled its aristocratic kin. We begin with the testimony of the animals' tutelary deity.

Late-imperial Beijing featured several temples dedicated to the Horse King. As noted above, this god protected all equines – horses, donkeys, and mules. Indeed some of his Beijing shrines – such as the one located within the Juyong Guan military fortress – must have been patronized by horse-riders (in this instance, imperial cavalry units).⁵⁹ However, at least one shrine was the patrimony of the donkey riders. The Horse King Hall within the Temple of the Eastern Peak (Dongyue miao 東嶽廟) was renovated in 1749 by the “Donkey Guild” (Lü hang 驢行), as attested by an imposing stele, which is still extant today (fig-

⁵⁹ Located at a strategic pass some 30 miles northwest of the capital, the Juyong Guan Horse King Temple is still extant. A stele inscription dated 1792 commemorates its renovation by the military commander Shu Ming-Ah 舒明阿 of the Mongol Blue Banner (information gathered during my visit to the site, August 2, 2014).

ure 10). Bearing the title of the “Horse King’s Sacred Association” (“Mawang shenghui” 馬王聖會), the handsome monument names no fewer than 164 members of the Donkey Guild.⁶⁰ They were likely engaged in diverse occupations that equally depended upon the humble equine – donkey merchants and drivers, coachmen, grooms, farriers and the like.

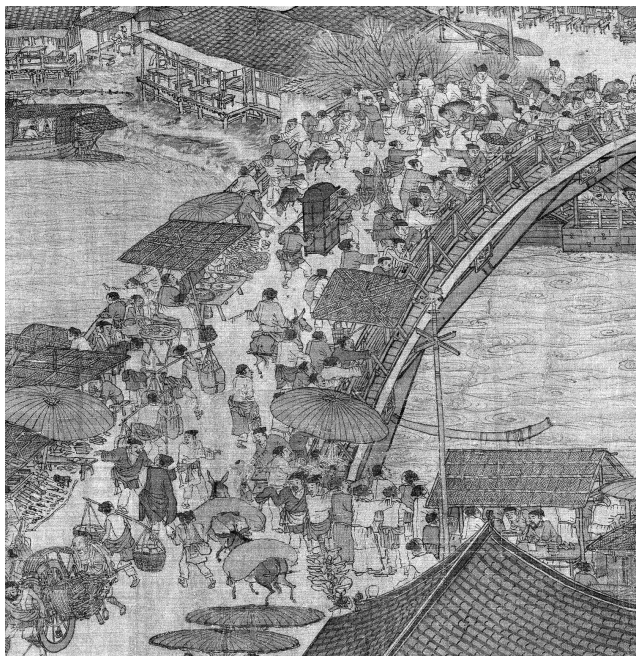


Figure 9. “Along the River during the Qingming Festival”

Work by Zhang Zeduan (fl. 1120); detail.



Figure 10. Stele of the Donkey Guild

*Erected 1749 in honor of the guild’s tutelary deity, the Horse King.
Temple of the Eastern Peak (Beijing);
photo by the author.*

⁶⁰ The stele inscription is transcribed in Zhao Shiyu 趙世瑜, *Beijing Dongyue Miao yu Beijing Taishan xinyang beike lu* 北京東嶽廟與北京泰山信仰碑刻錄 (Beijing: Zhongguo shudian,

The Donkey Guild founders of the shrine hailed from the equine market inside the Chaoyang Gate, some two miles westward (see map 2, above). The exact location is provided by the 1749 stele: “Devoutly erected by the virtuous disciples from the Donkey Market of the Eastern Four Archways.” As early as the Ming period, the famed landmark of the Eastern Four Archways (Dongsi pailou 東四牌樓) served as the hub of a busy equine bazaar, one lane of which was named, after its line of business, “Donkey Market Alley” (Lü shi hutong 驢市衚衕). The stele leaves no doubt that its merchants worshiped the god precisely because he benefitted their traded animals: “The people of Beijing devoutly venerate the Horse King. He has been worshiped for generations without interruption. This is especially true of us, his disciples of the Donkey Guild 驢行子弟, who depend upon the god for a living.”⁶¹

Beijing donkeys provided the equivalents of both taxi and shuttle services. One could hire a donkey that – led by its driver – would carry him to the destination he specified. Alternatively, he could ride one of the fixed donkey lines that connected the capital’s famed landmarks. In the latter case, no driver was needed – the animals were so well-trained that they memorized the required route, which they plied back and forth, day in day out. Situated outside the Xuanwu Gate, the Hired Donkeys Market (Ganlü shi 趕驢市) functioned as the hub of such shuttle services (see map 2). From here, donkey lines fanned out to cover the entire city. A detailed account is furnished by Lu Xingyuan’s 盧興源 (fl. 1930) English-language memoir of his native city. There was no danger of the donkeys being stolen, Lu fondly recalled, for they would never budge from the route they had been coached to follow:

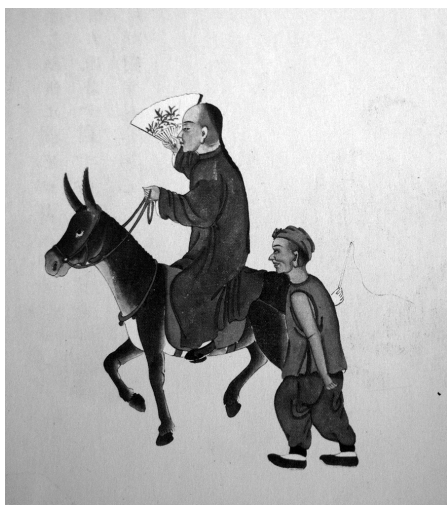
These donkeys have been trained to serve only these lines and so back and forth they go without the “owner drivers” following behind them. At the end of the journey some other members of the “donkey combine” will attend the details of the discharge including the collection of riding charges. There are usually no arguments about the terms regarding prices, for they are generally set at an uniform tariff and when there is any deviation from the understood rules such information is brought to the destination agents by a secret code word represented by typical knots tied on a piece of string that dangles as part of the harness or is hidden

2004), pp. 163–64; see also his “Yuanqin buru jinling’: Cong jisi zhongxin kan chengshi zhong de hangye yu jiequ: Yi Ming Qing jingshi Dongyue miao xilang zhushen wei chufadian” 遠親不如近鄰，從祭祀中心看城市中的行業與街區，以明清京師東嶽廟西廊諸神爲出發點，*Dongyue luncong* 東嶽論叢 26.3 (May 2005), pp. 40–45.

⁶¹ Zhao, *Beijing Dongyue Miao*, p. 163.

under the saddle bags. There was no fear of some ill-designing customers misleading the animals as the donkeys protest noisily if the customers desert them halfway and no matter how hard they may be beaten or otherwise intimidated they will not budge an inch if the customers should try to take them off the beaten track, but will create a scene that will spoil the scheme of any potential donkey thief.⁶²

Beijing donkey drivers faced stiff competition from the surrounding countryside. When their draft animals were not needed in the fields, the villagers would lead them to the city and tout them as cheap means of transportation. A beautiful illustration, accompanied by a charming written account, is preserved in a painted album of Beijing life. Likely dating from the late-nineteenth century, it includes one



hundred captivating pictures of Beijing customs, curiosities, and amusements – from street vendors of tofu, duck-eggs, and watermelons to beggars and garbage collectors. A host of street performers – storytellers, stilt-walkers, sword-swallowers, and acrobats – are depicted, as is the animal that faithfully served them all (figure 11). “This is a Chinese hired donkey,” reads the accompanying caption. “During the spring, autumn, and winter

Figure 11. “Donkey for Hire”

From the 19th-c. painted album *Beijing minjian fengsu baitu* (cited n. 63), p. 40.

[slack] seasons, villagers from the surrounding countryside come to the capital. Leading a donkey, they wait for customers by the city wall. The animal is hired out to the passersby for a modest fare. A ten-mile ride will cost no more than a few hundred Beijing copper coins. It is called *ganjiao* 趕腳 (donkey for hire).⁶³

⁶² Lu Xingyuan’s (English name: H. Y. Lowe) memoir was serialized in the *Peking Chronicle* before being issued in book form in 1940; see Lowe, *Adventures of Wu*, vol. 2, p. 170; compare *Lao Beijing de quwen chuanshuo* 老北京的趣聞傳說 (*Anecdotes of Old Beijing*), ed. Li Rongqiang 李榮強 et al. (Beijing: Lüyou jiaoyu, 2013), pp. 364–65.

⁶³ The album is preserved at Beijing National Library; see the photographic rpt. edn. *Bei-*

Like its human inhabitants, the donkeys had to contend with the wind storms that periodically swept the capital. Urban legends celebrated donkeys that were blown, with their riders, miles away. The 1788 *Sketches of the Imperial Capital* recorded that “On June 11, 1676, a great storm swept through the capital, darkening the skies. A man was riding his donkey by the Zhengyang Gate, when he was blown by the wind into midair. He was borne as far the Chongyang Gate [a mile away], before landing safe and sound with his mount.”⁶⁴ A similar incident, with a tragic outcome, was reported by an 1886 gazetteer: “On the sixth of the second lunar month a great wind arose covering the sky with yellow dust. A donkey rider was passing the Datong Bridge, when he was swept by the storm. Man and donkey fell into the water and drowned.”⁶⁵

SINCE WHEN?

Demographic and political factors might have contributed to the late-imperial reliance upon donkeys in the north China plains. Firstly, population growth made the breeding of horses exceedingly difficult. Under conditions of growing population pressure, it was harder and harder for the peasants to spare forage for the feeding of horses. Arable lands replaced pasturages, and an ever-growing percentage of the yield was consumed by people. The scarcity of horses – and the concomitant ubiquity of donkeys – likely reflected the growth of human population.

Secondly, the decline of horse husbandry – and the increased reliance upon donkeys – might have been spurred by political considerations. In his classic *History of Chinese Horse Breeding*, Xie Chengxia 謝成俠 (1914–1996) argued that Qing government policies were detrimental to native horse breeding.⁶⁶ Following their 1644 conquest, the Manchu promulgated a series of laws prohibiting Han farmers from raising

jing minjian fengsu bai tu 北京民間風俗百圖, ed. Yang Yang 楊揚 (Beijing: Shumu wenxian, 1983), p. 40. A young farm boy who leads his donkey to town in search of passengers is the subject of a lovely village play from Ding county (Hebei); see “Wangxiao ganjiao” 王小趕腳 in *Dingxian yangge xuan* 定縣秧歌選, ed. Li Jinghan 李景漢 and Zhang Shiwen 張世文 (Beiping: Zhonghua pingmin jiaoyu cujinhui, 1933), pp. 748–68; trans. Sidney D. Gamble, *Chinese Village Plays from the Ting Hsien Region* (Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1970), pp. 554–65.

⁶⁴ Wu Changyuan 吳長元, *Chenyuan shilue* 宸垣識略 (pref. 1788; Beijing: Beijing guji, 1982), j. 16, p. 342.

⁶⁵ *Guangxu Shuntian fu zhi* 光緒順天府志, comp. Zhang Zhidong 張之洞 and Zhou Jiamei 周家楣 (1886 edn.), j. 69, p. 15a; Datong Bridge 大通 was situated outside Dongbian Gate 東便, in the city’s eastern outskirts.

⁶⁶ Xie Chengxia, *Zhongguo yangma shi* 中國養馬史 (Beijing: Kexue, 1959), pp. 229–31.

horses, which, it was feared, might be used against them. Warhorses were supplied to the court from the grasslands north of the Great Wall, as Chinese farmers were forbidden to rear them. Recent scholarship has shown that these laws were not universally applied. Nonetheless, it is generally accepted that they had a negative impact on native horse husbandry.⁶⁷ In this way, Qing government policies might have inadvertently contributed to the proliferation of donkeys.

The role of donkeys prior to late-imperial times remains a topic for future research. The above-mentioned demographic and political factors might suggest that prior to the Qing period they were not as widely used. It might be useful to investigate, for example, the interplay of donkeys and horses in the economy of medieval China. Unquestionably, the Tang dynasty featured a highly developed equestrian culture. Suffice it to recall the fashionable eighth-century ladies who played polo (which was imported from Persia) or the jade and gold caparisoned mounts that danced to the music at the court of emperor Xuanzong (reigned 712–756).⁶⁸ It should be borne in mind, however, that the literary and visual records of Tang horses were products of elite culture. To what extent the horse's humbler kin figured in the daily lives of the common folk remains to be assessed. Even as the nobility rode thoroughbreds to the hunt, it is likely that donkeys pulled plows and millstones.

The ebb and flow of horse husbandry notwithstanding, ecological factors might have played a part in the longstanding Chinese reliance upon donkeys. The humble equines are perfectly suited to the arid north China climate. Resilient to heat and cold alike, they scavenge enough food for their sustenance even where natural forage is scant or of low quality. The difficulties that native dynasties encountered in their attempts to breed horses and the reliance upon imported ones (dating back to the first millennium bc) would seem to strengthen the case for the abundance of donkeys prior to the late-imperial period. Whether or not such was the case (and, if so, since when) is a question that awaits future study.

We conclude this essay on a comparative note. In an 1896 issue of his Los Angeles magazine *Land of Sunshine*, Charles Fletcher Lum-

⁶⁷ See Zhang Yang 張揚 and Zhang Farui 張法瑞, "Qingdai minjian yangmaye chutan" 清代民間養馬業初探, *Gujin nongye* 古今農業 2014.2, pp. 66–71.

⁶⁸ See, respectively, Dong Xinlin 董新林, "Gudai jiju yu maqiu yundong" 古代擊鞠與馬球運動, in Yang Hong 楊泓 et al., eds., *Ma de Zhongguo lishi* 馬的中國歷史 (Hongkong: Shangwu, 2008), pp. 74–80; and Paul Kroll, "The Dancing Horses of T'ang," *TP* 67.3–5 (1981), pp. 240–68.

mis argued that the settlement of the New World would have been impossible without the donkey's loyal services. The California explorer extolled the patient equine in the following terms:

The burro is a native of Spain and was fetched to America by the *conquistadores* three and a half centuries ago...His masters also brought the horse, cow, dog, cat, sheep, and poultry to a half world which had none of them before; but of all the animals introduced to America by the conquest, none filled quite so long-felt a want as the burro. He fitted the county to a T, and made himself at home everywhere from Deadwood [South Dakota] to Valparaiso [Chile], and was the most useful member of every community between.

Two-thirds of the New World would hardly have been civilized yet, without him, and except for his sure feet and patient back, our Southwest would be a howling wilderness to this day... The horse and the mule are fair packers; but both need to eat and both require some sort of footing. A burro, on the other hand, can carry his hundred-and-twenty-five pounds almost anywhere; and where there is nothing to eat, eats whatever non-edible thing may be handiest. So far as Spanish America goes – and it goes from Nebraska to Patagonia – the burro has been the cornerstone of history and the father of civilization.⁶⁹

The qualities that made the donkey indispensable to the Californian explorer likewise accounted for his salience in Chinese quotidian lives. The donkey's physiology is well adapted to arid and semi-arid regions, such as the American southwest and the north China plains. His economical use of water (second only to the camel) and his ability to feed upon small quantities of low-quality scrub enable him to survive in areas of limited rainfall and forage. Under conditions of growing population pressure, it was impossible for Chinese peasants to provide for many horses, the feeding of which would have entailed less food for human consumption. Instead, Chinese villagers could rely upon the labor of the donkey who, in Lummis's words, "eats whatever non-edible thing may be handiest." If the burro was the unsung hero of the colonization of the Americas, he was equally a cornerstone of the late-imperial Chinese economy.

⁶⁹ Charles Fletcher Lummis, "Brother Burro," in *Land of Sunshine* 4.3 (1896), pp. 106–8.