


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Calm at the Carriage, Kills Bandits, Protects the Stables: Unique Horse Names in Excavated Han Administrative Documents from Xuanquan

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Abstract

The Xuanquan postal station is to date the most well-documented example of a working postal station from the Han period. This paper presents a corpus of 115 excavated horse names recorded in Xuanquan administrative documents. Analysis of these names not only clarifies what tasks these horses were expected to perform at the station, but two unique naming conventions further articulate the complex relationships forged between humans and horses at this frontier site: giving horses human surnames and venerating aged horses. This article thus centers the act of naming individual animals as being of significant importance for future studies of human-animal interactions.

Keywords: Xuanquan; postal system; postal horses; excavated Han documents; animal studies

Scholarship has long recognized that the breeding and acquisition of horses has underscored territory, warfare, and trade between China and Inner Asia.¹ Second only to interest in warhorses, the horse-powered postal system has developed into an

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¹See H. G. Creel, “The Role of the Horse in Chinese History,” *The American Historical Review* 70.3 (1965), 647–72; Denis Sinor, “Horse and Pasture in Inner Asian History,” *Oriens Extremus* 19.1/2 (1972), 171–83; and Shing Müller, “Horses of the Xianbei, 300–600 AD: A Brief Survey,” in *Pferde in Asien: Geschichte, Handel und Kultur*, ed. Bert G. Fagner, Ralph Kauz, Roderick Ptak, and Angela Schottenhammer (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2009), 181–93 and 284–88 for long durée approaches to the role of horses in shaping Chinese, Inner Asian, and Xianbei histories. Both Susan Whitfield, “Alfafa, Pasture and the Horse in China: A Review,” in *Quaderni di Studi Indo-Mediterranei* Vol. 12, ed. Ephraim Nissan (Milan: Mimesis, 2020), 503–18, and Jessica Rawson, Limin Huan, and William Timothy Treal Taylor, “Seeking Horses: Allies, Clients and Exchanges in the Zhou Period (1045–221 BC),”

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increasingly well-studied aspect of Han administration. In recent years, the Xuanquan 懸泉 postal station in Gansu province has become one of the most significant sources of excavated slips from the Han 漢 period (202 BCE–220 CE), with particular relevance for the study of the postal system.²

Without the major excavations carried out by the Gansu Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology (甘肅省文物考古研究所) from 1990 to 1992, little could be said about this postal station on the basis of official histories and transmitted sources alone.³ However, these excavations revealed extensive Han period bamboo and wood slips that discuss the daily life and administration of the station. As the only excavated postal station possessing such extensive written material to date, the Xuanquan corpus provides unique insight into the daily administration and management of postal horses on the fringes of the Han empire. Referenced second only to humans in frequency, the site's postal horses are discussed in reams of reports, registers, notes, and ledgers which scrutinize their food rations, note their assigned tasks, and assess their appearance and condition. While previous studies have amply detailed the bureaucratic procedures surrounding the acquisition, use, and deaths of postal horses, one aspect has remained conspicuously overlooked: nearly all the horses were named.⁴

Journal of World Prehistory 34 (2021), 489–530, update and nuance earlier arguments around horse-breeding practices in China with particular attention paid to the importance of soil selenium.

²For studies of Xuanquan and the postal system, see those listed in Wu Rengxiang 吳昉驥, “Dunhuang Xuanquan zhi yizhi jianjiu zhengli jianjie” 敦煌懸泉置遺址簡牘整理簡介, *Dunhuang yanjiu* 敦煌研究, 1999.4, 100–101 alongside Y. Edmund Lien, “Reconstructing the Postal Relay System of the Han Period,” in *A History of Chinese Letters and Epistolary Culture*, ed. Antje Richter (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 15–52.

³The initial excavation report given in Gansu sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 甘肅省文物考古研究所, “Gansu Dunhuang Handai Xuanquan zhi yizhi fajue jianbao” 甘肅敦煌漢代懸泉置遺址發掘簡報, *Wenwu* 文物 2000.5, 4–20, has since been updated in the two-volume report Gansu sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo, Gansu jianbu bowuguan 甘肅簡牘博物館, and Dunhuang shi bowuguan 敦煌市博物館 eds., *Dunhuang Xuanquan zhi yizhi 1990~1992 nian tianye fajue baogao* 敦煌懸泉置遺址 1990~1992 年田野發掘報告 (Beijing: Wenwu, 2023). An excellent English-language summary of the site's history and excavation is given in Charles Sanft, “Edict of Monthly Ordinances for the Four Seasons in Fifty Articles from 5 C.E.: Introduction to the Wall Inscription Discovered at Xuanquan zhi, with Annotated Translation,” *Early China* 32 (2009): 125–208, which gathers Chinese and Japanese scholarship on the site's excavation. On the range and general characteristics of the Xuanquan textual corpus, see in particular He Shuangquan 何雙全, “Dunhuang Xuanquan zhi Hanjian wenshu de tezheng” 敦煌懸泉置漢簡文書的特徵, in *Kankan kenkyū no genjō to tenbō* 漢簡研究の現状と展望, ed. Ōba Osamu 大庭脩 (Suita: Kansai daigaku shuppanbu, 1993), 131–49; Wu, “Dunhuang Xuanquan zhi yizhi jianjiu zhengli jianjie,” 98–106; Zhang Defang 張德芳, “Jianlun Xuanquan Hanjian de xueshu jiazhi” 簡論懸泉漢簡的學術價值, in *Xinchu jianbo yanjiu* 新出簡帛研究, ed. Sarah Allan and Xing Wen 邢文 (Beijing: Wenwu, 2004), 409–12; and Zhang Junmin 張俊民, “Xuanquan zhi yizhi chutu jianbu wenshu gongneng xingzhi chutan” 懸泉置遺址出土簡牘文書功能性質初探, in *Jianbu xue yanjiu* 簡牘學研究 Vol. 4, ed. Gansu sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo and Xibei shifan daxue wenxue yuan lishi xi 西北師範大學文學院歷史系 (Lanzhou: Gansu sheng renmin, 2009), 76–85.

⁴Zhang Junmin, “Xuanquan Hanjian mapi wenti yanjiu” 懸泉漢簡馬匹問題研究, in *Dunhuang Xuanquan zhi chutu wenshu yanjiu* 敦煌懸泉置出土文書研究 (Lanzhou: Gansu jiaoyu, 2015), 300–383 gathers an impressive array of transcribed horse-related documents from the site with a brief exploration of horse names on pages 332–33. Two additional articles, Zhang Junmin, “Xuanquan Hanjian zhuanma bingshi yuanshu ji qita” 懸泉漢簡傳馬病死爰書及其他, in *Jianbo: Disan ji* 簡帛：第三輯, ed. Wuhan daxue jianbo yanjiu zhongxin 武漢大學簡帛研究中心 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 2008), 287–98 and Zhang Junmin, “Dui Handai Xuanquan zhi mapi shuliang yu lai yuan de jiantao” 對漢代懸泉置馬匹數量與來源的檢討, in *Jianbu xue lungao: Jusha pian* 簡牘學論稿：聚沙篇 (Lanzhou: Gansu jiaoyu, 2014), 457–73, focus on the administrative processes associated with horse registers, ledgers, and reports in more detail.

As few other excavated or transmitted sources note individual horse names, the Xuanquan corpus provides substantial evidence for the heretofore unappreciated and likely widespread social practice of naming horses. Secondly, the composition of the names themselves reflect stable staff's understanding and assessment of their equine co-workers, hinting at localized expectations, evaluations, and uses of postal horses. Finally, the striking use of human surnames and the veneration of aged horses suggests that the horses were entangled in humanized ideas of kinship, respect, and sentiment—not only highlighting the relevance of individual animal names in further studies of human-animal interactions, but also the centrality of the horses in the lives of Xuanquan stable staff.

Horse Names in Xuanquan Administrative Documents

The naming of animal species or individual animals articulates an unequal relationship between man and beast: it assumes the animal's inability to name itself and assumes man's ability to name it *correctly*. Studies on animal names in a Chinese context have mostly focused on the naming and taxonomical arrangement of species rather than the more complex case of individual animal names.⁵ Individual animal names not only embody themes of control and authority, but also of entanglement—with prior studies of European examples interpreting individual names as asserting fondness, closeness, and/or specialness.⁶

As Erica Fudge's study of cattle in seventeenth-century England attests, most dairy cows were named but few of these names are recorded in surviving legislative documents.⁷ By tentatively recreating the conversational use of animal names through

Sun Fulei 孫富磊, "Xuanquan Hanjian 'Ganlu er nian bingsi ma shu' suojian yizhi zhuanma guanli" 懸泉漢簡《甘露二年病死馬書》所見驛置傳馬管理, *Dunhuang xue jikan* 敦煌學輯刊 2019.3, 164–70 further builds on Zhang's work on the administrative processes related to equine reports. Qian Baihan 錢柏翰, "Handai Xuanquan jiu ruogan wenti yanjiu—jiuli biannian, mapi guanli, yu songying shiwu" 漢代懸泉廄若干問題研究——廄吏編年、馬匹管理、與送迎事務, Masters dissertation (Jilin University, 2021), 74–89, responds to Zhang's work in its discussion of registers and reports, but the majority of the dissertation focuses on the stable administration at Xuanquan, here expanding on Zhang Junmin, "Xuanquan Hanjian Jiu sefu, Jiuzuo renming zongshu" 懸泉漢簡廄畜夫、廄佐人名綜述, in *Dunhuang Xuanquanzhi chutu wenshu yanjiu*, 234–67. The most recent addition discusses Xuanquan's equine population in further detail, Zheng Binglin 鄭炳林 and Zhang Jingyi 張靜怡, "Xi Han Dunhuang jun jiuzhi zhuanma de peizhi, sunhao, yu buchong yanjiu – yi Xuanquan jiuzhi zhuanma wei zhongxin" 西漢敦煌郡廄置傳馬的配置、損耗與補充研究——以懸泉廄置傳馬為中心, *Dunhuang xue jikan* 2023.3, 1–16.

⁵On the classification of animal species in early China and the philosophical significance of rectifying animal terminology, see both Roel Sterckx, *The Animal and the Daemon in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 29–42, and "Animal Classification in Ancient China," *East Asian Science, Technology and Medicine* 23 (2005), 26–53.

⁶See Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500–1800* (London: Penguin, 1983), 96; Virginia DeJohn Anderson, *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 90; and Sune Borkfeldt, "What's in a Name? Consequences of Naming Non-Human Animals," *Animals* 1.1 (2011), 116–25 on individual animal names being markers of emotional entanglement and humanization. This assessment is complicated by Erica Fudge's study of cattle, discussed throughout.

⁷Erica Fudge, "Named Partners and Other Rugs: Animals as Co-Workers in Early Modern England," in *Quick Cattle and Dying Wishes: People and Their Animals in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 91–123.

everyday texts including diaries and jottings, Fudge highlights the pragmatism and ubiquity of livestock names in rural life. As most dairy cows were named, being named was not in and of itself indicative of a special emotional relationship, undermining prior theories on the emotive power of naming livestock animals. Moreover, in the context of wills, the daily use of animal names collided with scribal concerns over whether it was appropriate or relevant to record such names—in essence, *where* a name is recorded is just as telling as *what* the name is. Following Erica Fudge’s assessment of named cattle, I will first give examples of the kinds of documents in which horse names have been recorded in the Xuanquan corpus. Much like the dairy cows above, I suggest that it is highly likely that most postal horses at Xuanquan, and indeed other sites, had names in day-to-day life even if these were not always recorded. By considering the administrative circumstances that encouraged or allowed for the inclusion of equine names, we are able to recreate how the names functioned textually. By then incorporating additional jottings and informal writings, we are also able to access, to an extent, how these names were used conversationally at the site.

The majority of recorded horse names at Xuanquan are given in “registers” (*mingji* 名籍) and “formal reports” (*yuanshu* 爰書). Registers were compiled on a semi-regular basis to keep an inventory of the horses held at the Xuanquan stables, which usually totaled around forty horses at a time.⁸ The most oft-cited example of a horse register would be slips V92DXT1610②:10–20.⁹ These ten slips provide registry entries for nine horses along with a colophon titling the document “Register of Postal and Conveyance Horses” (Zhuanyi ma mingji 傳驛馬名籍) and stating that the document was commissioned in 31 BCE by then-Stable Bailiff (Jie sefu 厩嗇夫) of Xuanquan, Xin欣.¹⁰ The extant registry slips provide information for nine horses, with each entry following a clear formula: 1) category, i.e., postal or privately acquired horse; 2) coloration; 3) sex; 4) piercing, i.e., an identifying mark pierced into the ear; 5) age; and 6) height, followed by an individual name and/or remarks on the horse’s quality or particular usage in some cases.¹¹ Well over one hundred additional slips can be

⁸The number of horses can be inferred from slips IIT0115③:80–82, transcribed in Zhang, “Xuanquan Hanjian zhuanna bingshi yuanshu ji qita,” 291, wherein the missive refers to nine stables in the Dunhuang region holding a total of 360 horses, dividing down to around forty horses each. See both Zhang, “Dui Handai Xuanquanzhi mapi shuliang yu lai yuan de jiantao,” 459–65, and “Xuanquan Hanjian mapi wenti yanjiu,” 302–8, as well as Zheng and Zhang, “Xi Han Dunhuang jun jiu zhi zhuanna,” on the fluctuating number of horses held at Xuanquan.

⁹Serial marks are quoted as given in the respective catalogue, meaning some slips are referred to using abbreviated serial marks. This particular text must have been considered striking since it makes up one of only 272 selected texts transcribed in the first catalogue of Xuanquan slips, Hu Pingsheng 胡平生 and Zhang Defang, *Dunhuang Xuanquan Hanjian shicui* 敦煌懸泉漢簡釋粹 (Shanghai: Guji, 2001), 81–82, and was also one of the initial excavated texts transcribed in Gansu sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo, “Dunhuang Xuanquan Hanjian shiwen xuan” 敦煌懸泉漢簡釋文選, *Wenwu* 2000.5, 37–38.

¹⁰See Qian, “Handai Xuanquan jiu ruogan wenti yanjiu,” 29–33, for further slips mentioning Stable Bailiff Xin, who according to extant documents was Stable Bailiff 32–31 BCE.

¹¹While Gao Rong 高榮, “Handai ‘Zhuanyi ma mingji’ jian ruogan wenti kaoshu” 漢代《傳驛馬名籍》簡若干問題考述, *Ludong daxue xuebao* (zhexue shehui kexue ban) 魯東大學學報 (哲學社會科學版) 25.6 (2008): 34–38, understood the term *piao* 剽 as a tattooed mark on the animal’s hindquarters, I follow Li Hongcai 李洪財, “Qin Han jianzhong biao zhi shuyi ‘piao’ de xinzheng” 秦漢簡中標識術語「剽」之新証, *Zhongguo nongshi* 中國農史 2021.5, 13–22 in understanding *piao* to be needle marks in one ear.

identified which follow this same formula that were likely part of further registers.¹² Two fully intact slips are given below as examples of horse register entries:

傳馬一匹，鬪(驃)，乘，決右鼻兩耳數，齒十五歲，高六尺一寸，名曰野羊。¹³

One postal horse, palomino, gelding, splits in the right nostril and on both ears in numerous places, fifteen years old, 6.1 *chi* tall (13.9 hands), named Wild Goat.¹⁴

傳馬一匹，驃，牡，左剽，齒八歲，高五尺五寸，名曰野麋，下，□。元鳳三年。¹⁵

One postal horse, palomino, stallion, pierced left ear, eight years old, 5.5 *chi* tall (12.5 hands), named Wild Deer, inferior quality . . . Third year of the Yuanfeng reign era (78 BCE).

As can be seen in the first example where a date is added at the end, likely relating to the illegible character, additional information noting the circumstances for a horse entering or departing the postal service, equine illness, or death could be added at the end of registry entries.

Similar descriptive records are also found in ledgers noting the sale of horse-flesh and bones after a horse's death for "dead horse money" (*si ma qian* 死馬錢), as in the following slip, as well as descriptive tags accompanying privately acquired horses.¹⁶ It is not clear whether these privately acquired horses came with a former name or were renamed on their entry into the postal service—as will be seen, equine names were malleable and could be changed for a number of reasons.

傳馬一匹，騂，牡，驃左(左剽)，齒九歲，高六尺，名曰郭騂。賣讎骨肉，直三百五十。¹⁷

¹²Many additional horse register slips that have not yet been published in the ongoing Gansu jiandu bowuguan et al. catalogue project *Xuanquan Hanjian* 懸泉漢簡 are transcribed in Zhang, "Xuanquan Hanjian mapi wenti yanjiu," 315–31 (henceforth MPWTYJ), doubling known totals of registry slips and horse names. Transcriptions vary between Zhang Junmin's interpretations and the photographed slips published in these catalogues, meaning some characters may be altered when later volumes of this catalogue are published. Zhang's transcriptions also do not indicate if the slip is complete or broken, nor do they indicate the layout of the text. Preference has been given throughout to quoting from photographed slips.

¹³I90DXT0116@:39, photographed in Gansu jiandu bowuguan et al., *Xuanquan Hanjian* 懸泉漢簡, yi 壹 in 2 vols (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2019) (henceforth XQHJ(1)), vol. 1, 248.

¹⁴The interpretation of the horse's damaged nostrils and ears follows Hu and Zhang, *Dunhuang Xuanquan Hanjian shicui*, 82n2 glossing identical phrasing in the 31 BCE "Register of Postal and Conveyance Horses."

¹⁵I90DXT0209@:2, photographed in Gansu jiandu bowuguan et al., *Xuanquan Hanjian* 懸泉漢簡, er 貳 in 2 vols (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2020) (henceforth XQHJ(2)), vol. 1, 8.

¹⁶See Zhang Junmin, "Xuanquan Hanjian zhuanma bingsi yuanshu ji qita" on *si ma qian*.

¹⁷I90DXT0113@:23, photographed in XQHJ(2), vol. 1, 289.

One postal horse, red, stallion, [pierced] left ear, nine years old, 6 *chi* tall (13.7 hands), named Guo Xin (name to be discussed). Its bones and flesh were quickly sold, being worth 350.

Formal reports are another key administrative text that mention horse names. These documents would be drafted by Xuanquan stable administrators to report equine illness and death, particularly to establish (or deny) accountability, and this report would then be sent out to superiors in nearby Dunhuang 敦煌. As names were used in both internal and external documents, it seems that horse names were, if not familiar to staff external to Xuanquan, at the very least identifiable as being horse names by clerks at both sites. Indeed, any confusion could be clarified by the preceding description of the horse's physical appearance. The two Xuanquan reports below describe a sickly horse and a recently deceased horse respectively:

甘露三年正月庚辰朔庚辰，縣(懸)泉廩佐廣意敢言之，爰書：傳馬一匹，聊，乘，左剽，齒十八歲，高五尺七寸，名曰昔老。病中，強上，飲食不盡度。即與畜夫義、御稷明等五人雜[診]，馬病，守丞曾壽前。病中，強上，審証之。它如爰書，敢言之。¹⁸

On the *gengchen* day of the first month that began on a *gengchen* day of the third (= fourth) year of the Ganlu reign period (27 January 50 BCE), Xuanquan Stable Assistant [Meng 孟] Guangyi dares report this. Formal report: one postal horse, bay, gelding, pierced left ear, eighteen years old, 5.7 *chi* tall (13 hands), named Ancient Elder.¹⁹ Its neck grew stiff in the midst of illness and it did not eat or drink as normal. Along with Stable Bailiff [Zhang 張] Yi, Driver Zongming etc., we five people then variously [ascertained that] the horse was ill before (probationary) Assistant Governor Zeng Shou.²⁰ [Our] examination confirms that the horse's neck grew stiff in the midst of illness. The rest as in the formal report, [I] dare to report this.

¹⁸IIT0216③:136, transcribed in MPWTYJ, 323 no. 195.

¹⁹Qian, "Handai Xuanquan jiu ruogan wenti yanjiu," 18, corrects this date to the fourth year of the Ganlu reign period. See pages 51–52 for further slips mentioning Stable Assistant Meng Guangyi, who according to extant documents was Stable Assistant 50–47 BCE.

²⁰See Qian, "Handai Xuanquan jiu ruogan wenti yanjiu," 16–18 for further slips mentioning Stable Bailiff Zhang Yi, who according to extant documents was Stable Bailiff in 50 BCE. The term *shoucheng* 守丞 has been the subject of several dedicated articles, including Chen Zhiguo 陳治國, "Liye Qinjian 'shou' he 'shoucheng' shiyi ji qi ta" 里耶秦簡「守」和「守丞」釋義及其他, *Zhongguo lishi wenwu* 中國歷史文物 2006.3, 55–59; Zhang Chuanhan 張傳漢, "Ernian lüling 'cheng' yu 'shoucheng' de zhiquan qubie" 《二年律令》「丞」與「守丞」的職權區別, *Zhongguo lishi wenwu* 2006.3, 60; and Sun Wenbo 孫聞博, "Liye Qinjian 'shou' 'shoucheng' xinkao—jian tan Qin Han de shouguan zhidu" 里耶秦簡「守」、「守丞」新考—兼談秦漢的守官制度, *Jianbo yanjiu* 簡帛研究 (2012), 66–75, wherein *shou* 守 is taken to indicate the official was probationary. Wan Rong 萬榮, "Zhangjiashan Hanjian 'Zouyan shu' jishi yu xiangguan wenti yanjiu" 張家山漢簡《奏讞書》集釋與相關問題研究, PhD Dissertation (Wuhan University, 2006) argues that *shoucheng* was instead an abbreviation of Taishou cheng 太守丞 (Assistant Governor), so I have included "probationary" in brackets to reflect the possibility that the term is perhaps an abbreviation.

□□□□馬一匹，騶，乘，左剽，齒廿歲，高五尺六寸，名曰昔者。送使者常□□福、佐廣意、廢御何等七人雜診馬病死，審證之。它如爰書，敢言之。²¹

... one horse, bay, gelding, pierced left ear, twenty years old, 5.6 *chi* tall (12.7 hands), named Ancient One. The official sent was ... Fu, [Stable] Assistant [Meng] Guangyi, Stable Driver He etc., we seven people variously ascertained that the horse had died of illness. Our examination confirms this. The rest as in the formal report, [I] dare to report this.

Multiple registers, or a combination of registers and reports, likely existed for each horse. For instance, the same horse named Wild Swine (Yewai 野豨) is mentioned in both a register and a formal report after it died of disease, while duplicate registers appear to describe the horses Li Mang 李騶 (name to be discussed) and Lightening the Scales (Qingheng 輕衡) with minor discrepancies.²² These minor discrepancies suggest that a name was a more precise or reliable identifier than the preceding descriptions.

Despite their differing purposes, the above documents center on the status of an individual horse, making the inclusion of an individual name unsurprising.²³ Other Xuanquan documents, such as tallies of incoming and outgoing horses or calculations of food rations, do not include any names. This is also unsurprising since the text deals with the horses as a herd, not as individuals. However, despite excavations at other sites in the Hexi Corridor revealing similar horse registers and reports, including at nearby Juyan 居延, no horse names have yet been recovered from these sites.²⁴ It is, however, highly probable that at least some of the horses at other sites were named.

²¹II90DXT0112③:47, photographed in XQHJ(2), vol. 1, 249.

²²The same horse Wild Swine is mentioned in a register, I91DXT0309③:104 photographed in XQHJ(2), vol. 1, 67, and a report, I91DXT0309③:275 photographed in XQHJ(2), vol. 1, 100. I follow the transcription in XQHJ(2) of *wai* 豨 (swine?) rather than *xi* 卅 (forty) given in Hao Shusheng 郝樹聲 and Zhang Defang, *Xuanquan Hanjian yanjiu* 懸泉漢簡研究 (Lanzhou: Gansu wenhua, 2009), 43. Two registers for horses named Li Mang, with the only difference being a two-inch discrepancy in their heights, are given on slips I90DXT0112③:5, photographed in XQHJ(1), vol. 1, 112, and I90DXT0210③:13, photographed in XQHJ(2), vol. 1, 27; and for the horse Lightening the Scales, with the only difference being whether the horse is castrated, in registers I90DXT0111③:37, photographed in XQHJ(1), vol. 1, 93, and II90DXT0111③:3, photographed in XQHJ(2), vol. 1, 209.

²³There are two notable exceptions to the naming of horses in individualized documents: one formal report which discusses three horses, none of which are named, in I90DXT0116③:43, photographed in XQHJ(1), vol. 1, 249; and a handful of completely preserved registry slips that do not include a name at the end, here being slips I90DXT0109③:37, I91DXT0309③:129, and I91DXT0309③:139, photographed in XQHJ(1), vol. 1, 11 and XQHJ(2), vol. 1, 71 and 73 respectively. While this may initially suggest that certain horses were not named, it seems more likely that the names were, for some reason, purposefully or incidentally omitted.

²⁴Horse registry entries, or fragments following the same descriptive formula, are given on Juyan slips 065.012, 149.023, 154.015, 275.007, 510.027, and N120; and formal reports are given on slips 096.001, 491.011, and 535.001. Additional slips, possibly passports or notes of horse rentals, also describe individual horses without the addition of an equine name: 053.015, 062.013, 225.044, 506.003, and L1. All slips are photographed in the Jiandu zhengli xiaozu 簡牘整理小組, *Juyan Hanjian* 居延漢簡 (Taipei: Zhongyang jianjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo, 2014–2017) catalogue series.

We must therefore consider why so many horse names were recorded in surviving Xuanquan materials and not at other sites.

The relevance of equine names in Xuanquan documents likely correlates with the fact that Xuanquan housed a far larger population of horses in the stables situated at the south of the site than the garrisons, outposts, and fortifications excavated thus far.²⁵ Since only around thirteen terms for distinct equine colorations were used in the Xuanquan registers, names were essential in specifying an exact horse among an ever-changing population of forty or more horses. When considering sites with smaller populations of horses, color alone may have been sufficient in written documentation, even if names were used orally. This may also be why no names are given for the small population of oxen at Xuanquan, which were registered in similar “Registers of Government-owned Oxen” (Guanniu mingji 官牛名籍), even though incidental evidence suggests oxen could be named.²⁶ It is only within larger populations that individual names were of *textual* relevance.

Documentary evidence therefore suggests that the textual use of equine names at Xuanquan was confined to individualized documents, wherein the name served to specify and identify a particular horse among a large and fluctuating population. Any confusion or imprecision could be clarified via physical descriptions, but names could not be totally replaced when specificity was needed.

The general lack of textual evidence for postal horse names from sites across the Hexi Corridor does not mean that the oral use of horse names was just as rare. Indeed, this dearth is perhaps more reflective of scribal practices than of naming practices. As Fudge’s study suggests, “the rare inclusion of animals with names in wills is a reflection not of people’s understanding of the nature and status of their animals but of the legal document.”²⁷ While the practice of naming horses was likely widespread, names were clearly not included as standard in individualized documents, such as registers and reports, at other sites.²⁸

Jottings recovered from Xuanquan provide insight into how these names were used orally in conversations between stable staff. One slip mentions a horse named White [Horse] at the Wagon (Bailu 白路(輅)) returning in a few days, evidencing how

²⁵The stables are labelled as J1 (perhaps a medical clinic for the horses) and J2 in the site diagram given in Gansu sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo et al., *Dunhuang Xuanquanzhi yizhi*, vol. 1, 60, Fig. 22.

²⁶This title is given on slips I90DXT0114@:212 and I90DXT0209@:3, photographed in XQHJ(1), vol. 1, 205, and XQHJ(2), vol. 1, 8 respectively. Examples of oxen registers include: I90DXT0110@:86, I90DXT0110@:89, I90DXT0111@:17, I90DXT0111@:18, I90DXT0111@:45, I90DXT0111@:24, and I90DXT0111@:41, all photographed in XQHJ(1) and (2). Oxen could be named, as seen in the surviving name Black (Hei 黑) given in an inventory slip from Tomb No. 8 at Fenghuangshan 鳳凰山, Hubei (c. 179–141 BCE); Jin Li 金立, “Jiangling Fenghuangshan ba hao Hanmu zhujian shishi” 江陵鳳凰山八號漢墓竹簡試釋, *Wenwu* 1976.6, 71, no. 86.

²⁷Fudge, “Named Partners and Other Rugs,” 93.

²⁸It should also be noted that extant passports note a person’s appearance and often that of their horse, but none discovered at Xuanquan or Juyan include the horse’s name. This is likely because a horse would be unable to independently verify its name, and also because appearance alone would be sufficient to correctly identify the animal. On horse passports, see Anthony J. Barbieri-Low and Robin D. S. Yates, *Law, State, and Society in Early Imperial China: A Study with Critical Edition and Translation of the Legal Texts from Zhangjiashan Tomb no. 247* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 2:1112–20 and Daniel Sungbin Sou, “Crossing Borders: Control of Geographical Mobility in Early China,” *T’oung Pao* 104.3–4 (2018), 217–50.

names could track horses beyond the stable.²⁹ The following document further demonstrates the oral usage of equine names. It should be noted that Zhang Junmin's transcription, quoted here, seems to have incorrectly interpreted the slip's layout since the two teams of eight horses are given here as a team of ten and six. Until photographed, it will remain unclear which pair of horses have been listed incorrectly. Both teams are also listed as being on the right, meaning it is also likely that Zhang has misread one character for "left" as "right." Inaccuracies aside, this slip demonstrates how equine names were used in correspondence and conversation between stable officials at Xuanquan to specify and identify individual horses.

四月癸巳馬到澤上名: 游鷹、宜廩、會期、野頻(頰)、游食、空上、野駙、苻老、青爵(雀)、安車, 右八匹畜夫之部。被綉、殺寇、意佳、白兔、參(驂)龍、曉明, 右八匹畜夫義部。凡十六匹。四月癸巳校□³⁰

On the *guisi* day of the fourth month, these are the names of the horses which went to Zeshang: Wandering Hawk, Suited to the Stables, Arriving on Time, Wild Swine, Wandering for Food, High in the Sky, Wild Dun, Rush Elder, Indigo Sparrow, and Calm at the Carriage—these are the eight horses on the right [of each team] from Stable Bailiff [De 得] Zhi's department.³¹ Embroidered, Kills Bandits, Strong-willed and Handsome, White Hare, Outside-pair Dragon, and Dawn Brilliance, these are the eight horses on the right [of each team] from Stable Bailiff [Zhang] Yi's department.³² Total of sixteen horses. Written on the *guisi* day of the fourth month (9 June 50 BCE)

As the names are given here without additional descriptive remarks, it is clear that the oral use of equine names was, much like human names, deeply pragmatic and likely ubiquitous in daily conversation. If we assume that most horses were named, then being named was not indicative of specialness or fondness per se. Names were simply necessary when living, working, and caring for a large and ever-changing population of horses which would otherwise be difficult to neatly distinguish.

Nonetheless, the names themselves shed light on the shared spaces and lives of the Xuanquan stable staff and the resident postal horses. These names could be descriptive and imaginative, or evaluative and complimentary. We can imagine that Calm at the Carriage would be well-suited to many postal missions, while Kills Bandits would be ideal for patrolling. The composition of the names could also indicate different kinds

²⁹Slip I90DXT01100:97, photographed in XQHJ(1) vol. 1, 65, notes "White [Horse] at the Wagon will return in two days" 白路(輅)來歸二日. This name is translated on the basis of a similar name, Red [Horse] at the Wagon (Xinlu 駢路(輅)). The coloration *xin* 駢 is equine-specific, meaning both colors ought to describe a horse. Therefore, I suggest that *lu* 路 (road) is likely used in place of *lu* 輅 (wagon). White [Horse] at the Wagon is further referenced on slip I91DXT03090:242, photographed in XQHJ(2), vol. 1, 93, while Red [Horse] at the Wagon is given on slip IIT02150:166, transcribed in MPWTYJ, 331, no. 262.

³⁰IIT01150:57, transcribed in MPWTYJ, 328–29, no. 245.

³¹See Qian, "Handai Xuanquan jiu ruogan wenti yanjiu," 18, for further slips mentioning Stable Bailiff De Zhi. Both De Zhi and Zhang Yi were Stable Bailiffs in 50 BCE, with the sexagenary dating further confirming this as the date of this document.

³²Outside-pair refers to the position this horse occupied in a typical team of three or four horses pulling a carriage.

Table 1. Semantic Categories of Horse Names in Xuanquan Documents

Semantic Category	Number of Names	Percentage
Natural Imagery	40	35%
Function	29	25%
Human Surnames	20	17%
Appraisal	15	13%
Veneration of the Aged	6	5%
Objects	4	4%
Other	1	1%
	115	100

of human–horse relationships, even fondness, as will be examined further when discussing humanized horse names below.

Naming Conventions for Horses in Xuanquan Documents

In his wide-ranging summary of Xuanquan slips relating to horses, Zhang Junmin identified 189 instances of recorded horse names, a total that included duplicates and fragments.³³ Reassessing these records and removing ambiguous examples leaves a total of 115 unique horse names among the Xuanquan documents, some of which could refer to multiple individual horses.³⁴

The sheer variety of names, as best illustrated in the slip concerning Zeshang above, makes assessing naming conventions challenging. However, by imposing broader semantic categories we are able to divide the corpus of excavated names into seven groups. Due to their striking overlap with human kinship terms, two of these categories will be explored in greater detail later in this article—veneration of the aged and names using human surnames. Table 1 shows the numbers and percentage of these categories across the 115 horse names discovered at Xuanquan, while the division of the names is given in the Appendix.³⁵

Despite the seeming variety of horse names, ultimately three semantic categories make up 77 percent of all horse names (natural imagery, function, and surnames). By then assessing the 115 names on the basis of repeated patterns, as given in Table 2, we see that naming constructions remained relatively consistent across numerous tenures of Stable Bailiffs, Assistants, and Grooms. The most prevalent five constructions make up close to half of the known horse names, meaning that the seeming variety of horse names at Xuanquan was in fact far from random, adhering to major semantic categories and known naming conventions.

³³MPWTYJ, 379–83.

³⁴All names must be specified as belonging to *ma* 馬 (horse) on the slip to be considered as definitive equine names in this study.

³⁵Categorizing some of the more obscure names was ultimately subjective, but by and large most names clearly fit into only one of the categories. While the exact percentages may be altered slightly by other scholars, they remain a fairly accurate indicator of naming conventions for horses at Xuanquan.

Table 2. Horse Name Constructions

Construction Category	Number of Names	Percentage
Surname + Color	13	11%
Color + Nature	12	10%
Action + Animal	8	7%
Wild + Animal	8	7%
Surname + Surname	7	6%
	48	41%

Natural Imagery Names (35%)

The most prevalent semantic category is natural imagery, which largely follows three set combinations: Wild + Animal, as in Wild Deer, Wild Goat, and Wild Swine; Color + Nature, as in Vermilion Hare, White Hare, Yellow Duck (Huangli 黃駒), Yellow Swan (Huanghu 黃鵠), and Yellow Sparrow (Huangque 黃爵(雀)); and Action + Animal, as in Wandering Hawk, Flying Crow (Feiwu 蜚(飛)鳥), and Skittish Fish (Jingyu 驚魚).³⁶ More general natural imagery names reference rivers, skies, seas, and plants, as in Cinnamon Stick (Guitiao 桂條), Dawn Brilliance, and Autumn Frost (Qiushuang 秋霜).³⁷

These names are indicative of imaginative and comparative assessments of the appearance or movement of the horses, though some names may have been given without reference or knowledge of the individual horse itself. It is also difficult to ascertain what tasks the horses participated in on the basis of these names, nor how stable staff evaluated or assessed the horses' skills in said tasks.

Function Names (25%)

The defining aspect of this category is the use of verbs or descriptors related to the postal horses' duties. The horses at Xuanquan were primarily used to transport messages and goods for postal missions but were also available for guests or private hire.³⁸ As such, many of the names relate to journeying in a general sense, such as Dares to Venture Forth (Ganwang 敢往), Hastening through the Dusk (Qhun 趨昏), and Wandering the Mountains (Youshan 游山), while others more directly refer to

³⁶Yellow Duck refers to two different horses given on slips VIT1222②:20 and VT1611③:217, both transcribed in MPWTYJ, 316, nos. 97–98; Yellow Swan is given on slip VT1812②:201, transcribed in MPWTYJ, 318, no. 130; and Yellow Sparrow is given on slip V92DXT1610②:14, transcribed in Hu and Zhang, *Dunhuang Xuanquan Hanjian shicui*, 81. Flying Crow is given on slip IIT0314③:345, transcribed in MPWTYJ, 316, no. 102; and Skittish Fish is given on slip IIT0214③:282, transcribed in MPWTYJ, 316, no. 96.

³⁷Cinnamon Stick is given on slip I90DXT0207③:15, photographed in XQHJ(1), vol. 1, 292; Autumn Frost is given on a tag accompanying the acquisition of a private horse, given on slip IIT0214③:204, transcribed in MPWTYJ, 329–30, no. 252.

³⁸See Jidong Yang, "Transportation, Boarding, Lodging, and Trade along the Early Silk Road: A Preliminary Study of the Xuanquan Manuscripts," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 135, no. 3 (2015), 421–32 on the frontier position and functions of the Xuanquan station more broadly.

the transportation of messages, as in Perfect Porter (Shanzai 善載), Laden with Jade (Zaiyu 載玉), and Carrying Stars (Daixing 戴星).³⁹ These names evaluate the horses' speed, endurance, and ability to cover different terrain at all times of the day and night—skills required for successful postal and private journeys.⁴⁰

Additional names reflect the station's frontier position on the Han borderland, as in Patrolling and Observing (Jiaojian 徼見), Captures Bandits (Qinkou 禽擒寇), and the imposing Kills Bandits.⁴¹ While Y. Edmund Lien interprets punitive action against the use of a postal horse by a beacon clerk as suggesting postal horses were not to be used in reconnaissance missions, these names suggest that patrolling on horseback may have been acceptable at Xuanquan.⁴² Alternatively, these names may suggest that the horses were well-equipped to deal with dangers enroute in their private and postal missions.

Three names which use the character *jiu* 廄 (stables) neatly summarize a horse's duties at Xuanquan: Fills the Stables, reflecting the need for sufficient horses for postal and private hire; Protects the Stables (Quanjiu 全廄), remarking on the stable's frontier position; and Suited to the Stables (Yijiu 宜廄), suggesting that horses needed to work well with stable staff and each other.⁴³

While utilizing a variety of different characters, these names are united by their focus on how the horses were employed on a daily basis, clarifying the tasks required of them. Indeed, the horses Grain Route (Tongdao 種道) and Seed Route (Zhongdao 種道) were likely named after an additional equine duty: the fetching of grain deliveries from neighboring stations.⁴⁴ These names also highlight and appreciate equine qualities of speed, strength, and manageability, implying that a degree of knowledge about the horse

³⁹Dares to Venture Forth is a frequently recurring name on surviving fragments, with the most intact example clarifying it as a horse name being slip I90DXT0205②:2, photographed in XQHJ(1), vol. 1, 280; Hastening through the Dusk is referenced on two slips, likely the same horse in both instances, on slips IIT0115②:102 and IIT0115②:49, transcribed in MPWTYJ, 323, no. 196 and 327, no. 232 respectively; and Wandering the Mountains is given on slip I91DXT0309②:277, photographed in XQHJ(2), vol. 1, 100. Perfect Porter is given on slip I91DXT0309②:75, photographed in XQHJ(2), vol. 1, 62; Laden with Jade is given on slip IIT0315②:6, transcribed in MPWTYJ, 326, no. 225; and Carrying Stars is given on slips I90DXTT0114②:433 and 477, photographed in Gansu jiandu bowuguan et al., *Xuanquan Hanjian* 懸泉漢簡, *san* 叁 in 2 vols (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2023) (henceforth XQHJ(3)), vol. 1, 156 and 167.

⁴⁰Deliveries could be requested at any time of the day or night, with slip V1612②:11, transcribed in Hu and Zhang, *Dunhuang Xuanquan Hanjian shicui*, 92, noting an imperial message arriving at Xuanquan during the night being immediately transferred onto Dunhuang by horse.

⁴¹Patrolling and Observing is given on slip IIT0115②:248, transcribed in MPWTYJ, 316, no. 94; and Captures Bandits is given on slip I91DXT0309②:278, photographed in XQHJ(2), vol. 1, 100.

⁴²Lien, "Reconstructing the Postal Relay System of the Han Period," 27–28.

⁴³Protects the Stables is given on slip V92DXT1610②:12, transcribed in MPWTYJ, 317, no. 119; and Suited to the Stables is given on slip VT1812②:210, transcribed in MPWTYJ, 318, no. 128.

⁴⁴Grain Route is given on slip I91DXT0309②:227, photographed in XQHJ(2), vol. 1, 90; and Seed Route is given on a tag accompanying a privately acquired horse, VT1311②:172AB, transcribed in MPWTYJ, 313, no. 76. This suggests that Seed Route may have been renamed on its entry into the postal service. The possible role of horses in fetching or transporting grain is noted in slip I90DXT0111②:110, photographed in XQHJ(1), vol. 1, 102 among others. See Moonsil L. Kim, "Discrepancy between Laws and their Implementation: An Analysis of Granaries, Statutes, and Rations during China's Qin and Han Periods," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 59.4 (2016), 555–89 on Xuanquan materials discussing grain supplies more generally.

was necessary prior to naming them. In sum, many of these function names underline what skills the stable staff assessed, and indeed required, of the horses to maintain an efficient, working postal station on the fringes of the Han empire.

Appraisal Names (13%)

Appraisal refers firstly to the horse's appearance, as in the names Covered in Dapples (Menghua 蒙華), Only Bay (Zhiliu 隻驪), and the mare Fine-neck Black (Daoli 濫驪).⁴⁵ Additional names evaluate the horse's body, as in Lightening the Scales and Fat and Irregular (Feihui 肥回).⁴⁶ The graceful [Moves] as if Flowing (Ruoliu 若溜) and Making Little Noise (Yinxiao 音小) are similarly contrasted with the, likely flatulent, Poison Emitter (Dumao 毒冒).⁴⁷ These names also allude to the wider topic of equine physiognomy and physiognomic evaluation, as detailed in the excavated "Classic of Horse Physiognomy" (相馬經) from Mawangdui 馬王堆 among others.⁴⁸

Appraisal could also be more generally complimentary or evaluative, such as Strong-willed and Handsome, Accomplished and Handsome (Chengjia 成佳), and Recommended (Beijian 被荐).⁴⁹ These names reflect intimate knowledge and physical work with the horses, with the two more scornful or mocking names Fat and Irregular and Poison Emitter hinting at a shared humor between stable staff.

Objects (4%) and Other Names (1%)

Arguably the strangest excavated names are those based on objects. These names center on objects like pellets and coins, though the significance of these names remains unclear. Coins may be a reference to trade and commerce, with several being unearthed at the site, but this remains speculative.⁵⁰ The sole remaining name that does not fit well in any of the above categories is Five Relationships (Wuyi 五義), referring to the core five relationships in Confucian thought.⁵¹

Humanizing the Horse: Horses with Human Surnames

At present, there are twenty unique horse names that either combine a human surname with a horse coloration or with a second surname, as listed in the Appendix.

⁴⁵Covered in Dapples is given on slip I90DXT0111②:2, photographed in XQHJ(1), vol. 1, 87; Only Bay is given on slip I90DXT0109S:8, photographed in XQHJ(1), vol. 1, 21; and Fine-neck Black is given on slip IIT0216②:13, transcribed in MPWTYJ, 346, no. 211.

⁴⁶Fat and Irregular is given on slip I90DXT0114③:48, photographed in XQHJ(1), vol. 1, 226.

⁴⁷[Moves] as if Flowing is given on slip VT1411②:20, transcribed in MPWTYJ, 326, no. 226; Making Little Noise is given on slip IIT0115②:253, transcribed in MPWTYJ, 320, no. 151; and Poison Emitter is given on slip IIT0215②:69, transcribed in MPWTYJ, 318, no. 133.

⁴⁸See Mawangdui Han mu boshu zhengli xiaozu 馬王堆漢墓帛書整理小組, "Mawangdui Han mu boshu 'Xiang ma jing' shiwen" 馬王堆漢墓帛書《相馬經》釋文, *Wenwu* 1977.8, 17–22 and in particular Roel Sterckx, "An Ancient Chinese Horse Ritual," *Early China* 21 (1996), 47–79 on horse physiognomy.

⁴⁹Accomplished and Handsome is given on slip I90DXT0114④:402, photographed in XQHJ(3), vol. 1, 263; and Recommended is given on slip IIT0115④:3, transcribed in MPWTYJ, 316, no. 95.

⁵⁰Coins are photographed in Gansu sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo et al., *Dunhuang Xuanquanzhi yizhi*, 2: pls. 19–21.

⁵¹Five Relationships is given on slip IVT0317③:26, transcribed in MPWTYJ, 327, no. 237.

Zhang Junmin theorized that the surnames were those of the original owner or the stable groom responsible for the horse, which he argues is particularly discernable when two surnames are combined into one name.⁵² However, I find this assertion somewhat presumptive.

Most of the slips giving these horse names are undated, meaning that there are naturally potential overlaps between the tenure of stable staff and the duration that certain horses were housed at Xuanquan. For instance, the three individual horses with the surname Zhang 張 could have conceivably coincided with the tenure of Stable Bailiff Zhang Yi in 50 BCE, Zhang Suicheng 張遂成 in 40–36 BCE, or Stable Assistant Zhang Ba 張霸 in 28 BCE; the horse Mr. Li the Black-with-a-white-face (the aforementioned Li Mang 李騷) could have possibly overlapped with the tenure of Stable Bailiff Li Guang 李光 in 45–41 BCE; and Mr. Chen the Gray (Chen Gui 陳騷) could have coincided with the tenure of Stable Bailiff Chen 陳 in 35 BCE or Stable Assistant Chen Guang 陳光 in 32 BCE. With no dates to accurately *prove* an overlap between the named horses and the tenure of certain staff sharing this surname, we must acknowledge that most of the horse surnames are incredibly commonplace. Overlaps between the surnames of horses and stable staff are thus highly likely and such coincidences prove very little. Indeed, the presence of multiple stable staff with the same surname in a short span of time, where a horse could easily live through multiple tenures of staff surnamed Chen etc., further undermines this theory.

Neither does the claim that the surnames are a relic from prior owners seem likely. None of these horses appear to have been purchased from private owners, which would usually be noted in registers or tags, and thus likely came from stud farms close to Dunhuang or from further afield.⁵³ Privately acquired horses could also have easily been renamed on their arrival at Xuanquan.⁵⁴

It is especially striking that horses were given human surnames since animals were often described as not understanding abstract kinship relations.⁵⁵ If placed in their human context, surnames cannot be understood in isolation; instead, these mark an individual's place within a more abstract patrilineal social unit. Since animals were thought to not be able to understand a father–child relationship, surnames should have been meaningless, even inappropriate, to bestow on horses. While we move rapidly into the realm of speculation, I raise here two possible explanations for why horses were given surnames.

One possibility is that these names were a form of satire. Perhaps the stable staff aped human names for amusement, much as when modern-day pet owners give their animals starkly human names with honorific titles like Mister. The horse Mr. Ma the

⁵²MPWTYJ, 332.

⁵³See Zhang, “Dui Handai Xuanquanzhi mapi shuliang yu lai yuan de jiantao,” 465–72 on the origins of horses at Xuanquan, and Liu Hui 劉輝, “Xi Han zhuanyi mapi de lai yuan kaoshu” 西漢傳驛馬匹的來源考述, *Leshan shifan xueyuan xuebao* 樂山師範學院學報 26.2 (2011), 88–90 on origins of postal horses more generally. Mr. Xin the Red specifically was received from the nearby outpost of Xiaogu 效谷 acc. to Zhang's analysis on page 471.

⁵⁴See n. 44 on the possible renaming of the privately acquired horse Seed Route.

⁵⁵This is amply explored in Keith N. Knapp, “Noble Creatures: Filial and Righteous Animals in Early Medieval Confucian Thought,” in *Animals through Chinese History: Earliest Times to 1911*, ed. Roel Sterckx, Martina Siebert, and Dagmar Schäfer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 75–82.

Red (Ma Xin 馬駢), whose surname is itself the word for horse, stands out as being particularly ironic and amusing.⁵⁶ This theory, however, struggles to neatly explain the dual surname names such as Mr. Zhang-Long (Zhang Long 張龍), unless we read these as being somewhat unusual surname–personal name constructions.⁵⁷

A more pragmatic theory would be that the surnames referenced particular breed stocks or horse breeders, much as is seen in the names of today’s racehorses.⁵⁸ This would provide a practical motivation for including this information in the horses’ names. These particular horses were all approx. 13.7 hands high, the most common height for recorded horses, with the exception of the towering Mr. Zhang the Gray (Zhang Gui 張驄) at 16 hands high who is also the tallest known horse registered at Xuanquan.⁵⁹ Scant additional information is given about any other defining characteristics, meaning it is difficult to draw conclusions about traits shared by certain horses with the same surname.

Nonetheless, certain people closely associated with horses were given horse-related surnames, such as the Ma 馬 or “Horse” family which descended from a general who was bestowed the title Horse-taming Lord (Mafu jun 馬服君).⁶⁰ His descendant Ma Yuan 馬援 (14 BCE–49 CE), in an act of nominative determinism, was himself a great connoisseur of horses. One of the Xuanquan horses, somewhat ironically, even has the same surname: Mr. Ma the Red, or Mr. Red Horse. If the boundary between humans who worked closely with horses was porous enough to impact human surnames, it may be that a similar process affected horse names. While unrecorded, perhaps famed horse breeders, or those receiving such horses, attached surnames onto this stock, highlighting these animals as being particularly vaunted or valuable.

Nonetheless, this is not the only instance of horses being given distinctly humanized names at Xuanquan, raising the question of whether this humanization was incidental or intentional.

Humanizing the Horse: Veneration of Aged Horses

A further naming practice apparent in the Xuanquan corpus is the use of honorific titles for aged horses. Since most registers and reports describe horses aged around seven to nine years of age, horses of fifteen years or older were statistically uncommon—accounting for only 13.5% of horses referenced in Xuanquan documents.⁶¹ Four horses bear names that directly relate to their advanced age: Thousand

⁵⁶This name is given on slip IIIT0807③:26, transcribed in MPWTYJ, 328, no. 240.

⁵⁷Mr. Zhang-Long is given on slip IIIT0807③:2, transcribed in MPWTYJ, 316, no. 104.

⁵⁸Katharina Leibring, “Animal Names,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming*, ed. Carole Hough (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 618–19, briefly discusses modern European naming conventions for racehorses, wherein surnames can refer to a breeder or equine sire (i.e., pedigree lineage).

⁵⁹See MPWTYJ, 336–37 on recorded horse heights. The taller Mr. Zhang the Gray is given on slip 190DXT0112②:10, photographed in XQHJ(1), vol. 1, 130.

⁶⁰*Shi ji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 43.1821–22 records the bestowal of this title. Further conflations between *shi* 氏 surnames and officers charged with animal management are highlighted in Sterckx, *The Animal and the Daemon*, 54.

⁶¹See MPWTYJ, 335, table 2 on ages given for horses in reports and registers.

Years (Qiansui 千歲) at fifteen years old, Ancient Elder (Xilao 昔老) at eighteen years old, Ancient One (Xizhe 昔者) at twenty years old, and the impressively aged Yarrow Elder (Shilao 耆老) at twenty-four years old.⁶² We can only presume that these aged horses obtained these names once they had grown old. Indeed, one partially intact register suggests that horses could be renamed:

... 左剽，齒六歲，高五尺八寸，名曰青[鳥+付]。今名青鹿，故給置。⁶³
 ... pierced left ear, six years old, 5.8 *chi* tall (13.2 hands), named Indigo Fu-bird.
 It is now named Indigo Deer, so [we] provide [this register for] the station[‘s records].

Much like Chinese names more generally, horse names were liable to change with age or, in the case of Indigo Deer, other unknown circumstances.⁶⁴

Ancient Uncle (Xiye 昔耶(爺)) was the youngest horse to be named in such a way at only nine years old.⁶⁵ This name was likely given due to the horse being black with a white face, with its grizzled face perhaps resembling an aging horse or person. Finally, Rush Elder is only mentioned in passing and, without a register or report, we cannot be sure how old this horse was. Nonetheless, given the name’s structural similarity to Yarrow Elder, it is likely that this was another aged horse.

The esteeming of aged horses, as reflected in the use of names specifying advanced age, shares striking parallels with the veneration of aged people more generally. Honorific characters such as *lao* 老 (aged) and *weng* 翁 (elderly man) could be added to personal names when people grew old, and honorific addresses for the elderly often use similar characters.⁶⁶ Concern for the welfare of the elderly was recurrent in philosophical treatises. Slips from the Han period, as discussed in greater detail by A. F. P. Hulswé, state the elderly were exempted from taxation duties and most criminal punishments and, at least symbolically, received food, silk, and a special staff that marked them as aged.⁶⁷ It seems highly likely that these equine names thus reflect a certain fondness, rather than scorn, for the elderly horses since the characters overlap with honorific terms for elderly people.

When considering the use of both surnames and honorifics, it is noteworthy that the stable staff and horses were all male, with only two mares discovered thus far

⁶²Two fifteen-year-old horses who died only days apart were named Thousand Years, as given in the report VT1310③:215, transcribed in MPWTYJ, 324, no. 206 and the report or updated register II90DXT0114②:511, photographed in XQHJ(3), vol. 1, 173. Yarrow Elder is given on the registry slip T0216②:915, transcribed in MPWTYJ, 317, no. 115. Yarrow was a divinatory grass that supposedly grew for one hundred years, hence its usage here.

⁶³IT0213②:100, transcribed in MPWTYJ, 330–31, no. 260.

⁶⁴Consider the changing names a person could accumulate in a lifetime (and even beyond), including a milk-name, courtesy name, pen-name, nickname, religious name, posthumous name, and temple name.

⁶⁵I90DXT0108②:9, photographed in XQHJ(1), vol. 1, 3.

⁶⁶See Wolfgang Bauer, *Der Chinesische Personennamen: Die Bildungsgesetze und hauptsächlichsten Bedeutungsinhalte von Ming, Tzu und Hsiao-Ming* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1959), 125–26 which includes several Han examples.

⁶⁷A. F. P. Hulswé, “Han-China: A Proto ‘Welfare-State’? Fragments of Han Law Discovered in North-West China,” *T’oung Pao* 2nd ser. 73.4/5 (1987), 265–85.

among over 150 registers.⁶⁸ Even in the Western Han when *xing* 姓 (surnames) were not yet standardized, surnames tended to favor patrilineal descent. So too were male ancestors, who were obviously aged, singled out for memorialization and veneration. These male horses were thus enfolded into specifically patrilineal structures through the use of surnames and the veneration of the aged. This accords with Hou Xudong 侯旭東 and Howard L. Goodman's observation of a "sentimentalized patrilineal consciousness" emerging in this timeframe.⁶⁹ Horses, in some way, reproduced human, patrilineal kinship structures through the social and relational power of names.

It is likely that the evident fondness for aged horses expressed in these honorific names was emblematic of long-term, shared working lives spent with particular horses. Within the array of horses housed at Xuanquan which often came and went on postal missions; grew sick, starved, or died; or were bought, sold, or gifted away; consistency was marked and unusual. Rather than enacting *exact* parallels of human relationships, these names used the social power of names to voice human-horse bonds.

Conclusions

This article has explored the heretofore overlooked social practice of naming individual animals. While these administrative texts provide only incidental evidence of a much broader phenomenon, these records provide tantalizing glimpses into the largely unrecorded social practice of naming animals more generally.

In the case of horses at Xuanquan, given names often correlate to the tasks horses were typically charged with (patrolling, transporting, traveling) and the skills needed to complete these duties effectively (speed, calmness, strength, endurance). As stable staff worked closely with and relied on horses during these tasks, it is not surprising that these duties impacted how the horses were assessed and named. Other names highlight imaginative, comparative, or complimentary assessments of the horses, but all remain notably "equine" or "horsey," clearly distinguishable from most human names.

However, analysis of two humanized naming conventions highlights the potential emotional depths of stable staff's connections with the postal horses they cared for. With only a narrow lens onto the site and the practice of naming horses in general, it is difficult to fully parse why stable staff extended human kinship terms onto horses and what kind of relationship they meant to signal through surnames and aged honorifics. Giving horses human surnames is a phenomenon that eludes a neat explanation, and could be an act of satire or amusement, a marker of pedigree or origin, or an act of intentional humanization. This matter is further complicated by the use of honorific names for aged horses, names likely only bestowed upon the eldest horses at the site. The use of such names, paralleling terms for human elders, are far more indicative of

⁶⁸An unnamed mare is registered on slip I91DXT0309③:139, photographed in XQHJ(2), vol. 1, 73, as well as the aforementioned mare Fine-neck Black.

⁶⁹Hou Xudong 侯旭東 and Howard L. Goodman, "Rethinking Chinese Kinship in the Han and Six Dynasties: A Preliminary Observation," *Asia Major* 3rd ser. 23.1 (2010), 62.

fondness than scorn. It would seem that the use of aged honorifics may present a new (to scholarship) way of voicing human–horse bonds that borrowed from existing human social conventions.

We can therefore conclude that the naming of horses was, at its core, deeply pragmatic. These names were widely used in conversation at Xuanquan and, in all likelihood, other sites, but were only textually relevant under certain circumstances. The names themselves largely conformed with conventions and constructions shared across generations of stable officials, giving order to the wild variety of names. The composition of these equine names further underscores localized use and reliance on horses at Xuanquan, and the two humanized naming conventions encourage further consideration of how working closely with animals catalyzed new, perhaps localized, interpretations of human-animal bonds and boundaries.

Appendix: Semantic Divisions of the 115 Unique Horse Names Recorded in Extant Xuanquan Documents

Semantic category	Named horses		
Nature Imagery (40)	Yellow Sparrow (Huangque 黃爵(雀))	Steed Hare (Titu 驎兔)	
	Yellow Duck (Huangli 黃勛)	Skittish Fish (Jingyu 驚魚)	
	Yellow Swan (Huanghu 黃鵠)	Skittish Crow (Jingwu 驚鳥)	
	Yellow Hawk (Huangying 黃鷹)	Wandering Fish (Youyu 游魚)	
	Vermilion Hare (Chitu 赤兔)	Wandering Hawk (Youying 游鷹)	
	White Hare (Baitu 白兔)	Flying Crow (Feiwu 飛鳥)	
	Navy-blue Hawk (Cangying 倉(蒼)鷹)	Flying Palomino (Feipiao 蜚(飛)票(驃))	
	Navy-blue Waves (Cangbo 倉(蒼)波)	Flying Tarpan (Feitao 蜚(飛)駟)	
	Indigo Sparrow (Qingque 青爵(雀))	Flying Bay (Feiliu 蜚(飛)驢)	
	Indigo Fu-bird (Qingfu 青[鳥付])	Cinnamon Stick (Guitiao 桂條)	
	Indigo Deer (Qinglu 青鹿)	Dawn Brilliance (Xiaoming 曉明)	
	Zhe-colored Goose (Zhehong 駝鴻)	High in the Sky (Kongshang 空上)	
	Wild Goat (Yeyang 野羊)	Fields and Springs (Tianquan 田泉)	
	Wild Deer (Yemi 野麋)	Mirror River (Jinghe 鏡河)	
	Wild Deer (Yelu 野鹿)	Gazes at the River (Wangjiang 望江)	
	Wild Camel (Yeluo 野駱)	Avoids/Washes in Rivers (Zhao (tao) he 兆(逃/洮)河) ⁷¹	
	Wild Beast (Yezhuo 野湼()) ⁷⁰	Autumn Frost (Qiushuang 秋霜)	
	Wild Swine (Yewai 野豕)	Breaks Rocks (Poshi 破石)	
	Wild Bird (Yeniao 野鳥)	Dragon Wave (Longbo 龍波)	
	Wild Dun (Yegua 野驕)	Son of Dragons (Longzi 龍子)	
	Function (29)	Fills the Stables (Manjiu 滿廄)	Calm at the Carriage (Anche 安車)
		Suited to the Stables (Yiji 宜廄)	Outside-pair Dragon (Canlong 參駢)龍 ⁷³
		Dares to Venture Forth (Ganwang 敢往)	Iron Pillar-horse (Tiezhu 鐵柱)
		Hastening through the Dusk (Quhun 趨昏)	Handsome Pillar-horse (Jiazhu 佳[柱]) ⁷⁴
		Hastening through the Bao-Grass (Qubao 趨葆) ⁷²	Perfect Porter (Shanzai 善載)
			Laden with Jade (Zaiyu 載玉)

(Continued)

⁷⁰I suggest this alternate reading of *zhuo* 湼 (soaked; plentiful) with the similarly pronounced *zhuo* (a beast) as all names involving *ye* 野 (wild) are invariably followed by a type of animal.

⁷¹This name remains ambiguous given the multiple ways *zhao* 兆 could be interpreted here.

⁷²This name could be translated in several ways: Hastening and Protecting (*bao* 保), Hastening to the Fortress (*bao* 堡), etc., but remains a function name in most obvious cases. The focus is on the animal's movement rather than the potential natural imagery of bao-grass.

⁷³Despite referencing a dragon here, this name highlights the particular position of the horse in a three- or four-horse carriage teams, so ought to be a function-derived name.

⁷⁴*Zhu* 柱 (pillar) is interpreted as a "main horse," i.e., the opposite of a supplementary or auxiliary horse, in Gao, "Handai 'Zhuanyi ma mingji' jian ruogan wenti kaoshu," 36–38, and as a "pack horse" in Wang Zhiyong 王志勇, "Hanjian suojian 'zhuma' xin jie" 漢簡所見「柱馬」新解, *Nanjing shifan daxue wenxueyuan xuebao* 南京師範大學文學院學報 2018.3, 146–48. The archaeological report describes

(Continued)

Semantic category	Named horses	
	Wandering the Mountains (Youshan 游山)	Carrying Stars (Daixing 戴星)
	Wandering for Food (Youshi 游食)	Protects the Stables (Quanjiu 全廄)
	Galloping among the Stars (Benxing 犇星) ⁷⁵	Protects the Sacks (Baotuo 葆(保)橐)
	Crosses the Route (Hengdao 橫道)	Patrolling and Observing (Jiaojian 徼見)
	Grain Route (Tongdao 種道)	Returning Army (Huanjun 還軍)
	Seed Route (Zhongdao 種道)	Looks Down on the Enemy (Qingdi 輕適(敵))
	White [Horse] at the Wagon (Bailu 白路(輅))	Captures Bandits (Qinkou 禽(擒)寇)
	Red [Horse] at the Wagon (Xinlu 駢路(輅))	Kills Bandits (Shakou 殺寇)
		Arriving on Time (Huiqi 會期)
		Benefits the Herd (Liquan 利群)
Human Surnames (20)	Mr. Chen the Gray (Chen Gui 陳駮)	Mr. Xin the Red (Xin Xin 新駢)
	Mr. Ding the Red (Ding Xin 丁駢)	Mr. Yang the Gray (Yang Gui 楊駮)
	Mr. Guo the Palomino (Guo Piao 郭驪)	Mr. Zhang the Gray (Zhang Gui 張駮)
	Mr. Guo the Red (Guo Xin 郭駢)	Mr. Wang-Yang (Wang Yang 王陽)
	Mr. Huang the Red (Huang Xin 黃駢)	Mr. Wang-Yang (Wang Yang 王楊)
	Mr. Ji the Gray (Ji Gui 紀駮)	Mr. Yang-Yu (Yang Yu 陽玉)
	Mr. Li the Black-with-a-white-face (Li Mang 李駮)	Mr. Yang-Cheng (Yang Cheng 陽成)
	Mr. Long the Red (Long Xin 龍駢)	Mr. Yu-Yang (Yu Yang 玉陽)
	Mr. Ma the Red (Ma Xin 馬駢)	Mr. Zhang-Long (Zhang Long 張龍)
	Mr. Qiwu the Gray (Qiwu Gui 綦毋駮)	Mr. Zhang-Shun (Zhang Shun 張順)
Appraisal (15)	Fine-neck Black (Daoli 濫驪)	Wholly Fortunate (Wanxing 完幸)
	Covered in Dapples (Menghua 蒙華)	Possessing a Peerage (Youjue 有爵)
	Only Bay (Zhiliu 隻驪)	Accomplished and Handsome (Chengjia 成佳)
	Lightening the Scales (Qingheng 輕衡)	Strong-willed and Handsome (Yijia 意佳)
	Fat and Irregular (Feihui 肥回)	Recommended (Beijian 被荐)

(Continued)

evidence of pillars for tethering horses in the main stable area, so I therefore instead read *zhu* as referring to horses tethered to these pillars ready for postal journeys or private hire. The obscured second character is transcribed as *dun* 楯 (shield) in Hu and Zhang, *Dunhuang Xuanquan Hanjian shicui*, 84, no. 16 and as *yi* 楫, often read as “pillar,” in Zhang, “Xuanquan Hanjian mapi wenti yanjiu,” 318, no. 125. I suggest this second character, until photographs are published, ought to be read with the meaning of *zhu* (pillar).

⁷⁵This name was given on a separate fragment to the register itself, with the two slips I90DXT0112③:23 + I90DXT0114③:54 being convincingly connected in Xie Minghong 謝明宏, “Xuanquan Hanjian (er) zhuihe no. 26” 《懸泉漢簡(貳)》綴合(二十六), *Jianbo* 簡帛 (online 22 January 2022), available here: www.bsm.org.cn/?hanjian/8621.html.

(Continued)

Semantic category	Named horses	
	[Moves] as if Flowing (Ruoliu 若溜) Making Little Noise (Yinxiao 音小) Poison Emitter (Dumao 毒冒)	Embroidered (Beixiu 被綉) Pursues Perfection (Zhushan 逐善)
Veneration for the Aged (6)	Ancient Uncle (Xiye 昔耶(爺)) Ancient One (Xizhe 昔者) Ancient Elder (Xilao 昔老)	Thousand Years (Qiansui 千歲) Yarrow Elder (Shilao 耆老) Rush Elder (Fulao 苻(享)老)
Object (4)	Basin of Coins (Penzhu 盆銖) Vermilion Coin (Chizhu 赤銖) Dragon Coin (Longzhu 龍銖) Golden Pellet (Jinwan 金丸)	
Other (1)	Five Relationships (Wuyi 五義)	

安車、殺寇、全廐：懸泉置出土漢簡中的傳驛馬匹名稱

龍凱思

提要

懸泉置可謂至今最為詳實的漢代郵政站範例。本文列出了懸泉置出土漢簡中所記錄的馬匹名稱，總計達115個。透過分析這些名稱，不僅能夠闡明這些馬匹被期望承擔的任務，還能夠突顯出這個偏遠地區人與馬之間複雜的關係。其中包括給馬匹賦予人類姓氏以及為年長馬匹取尊敬的名字這兩種獨特的命名慣例。本文旨在論證動物的命名對於未來的人類與動物互動研究具有重要的意義。

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