

# Prevailing Custom of Horse Riding among Women in the Tang Dynasty Reflected by Horse Riding Figurines

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## Abstract

Horse riding became a fashion in the Tang Dynasty. People took pride in riding horses, and horse riding was necessary especially on various grand occasions. The horse riding figurine can be seen in tombs from the early Tang Dynasty to the late Tang Dynasty. There are also documentary records of women riding horses in the Tang Dynasty, which indicate that travel by riding horses had become part of daily life of aristocrat women at that time. This can be confirmed by a large number of different postures and shapes of horse riding figurines unearthed from the tombs of the Tang Dynasty as well as physical materials left over from other historical periods.

**Key words:** The Tang Dynasty, Woman, Horse riding, The horse riding figurine

## Introduction Introduction

Since the Han Dynasty, Chinese dynasties in central plains were greatly interested in good horse from the Western Regions, they not only assigned emissaries to purchase and trade for good horses with a huge sum of money, but also obtained them by force. Since the unification of the nation in the Sui Dynasty, horse riding originating from northern ethnic groups of the Northern Dynasty began to flourish. The thirst of rulers of the Han Dynasty for good horses continued in the Tang Dynasty. In addition to buying and trading for horses and taking them by force, horse breeding began to prevail in the Tang Dynasty. In the Kaiyuan period of the Tang Dynasty, *Zi Zhi Tong Jian* recorded: "One hundred thousand bolts of silk fabrics were traded for good horses with Tujue (a nationality in ancient China) to support the military, and the officials of the animal husbandry were responsible for breeding those horses. Therefore, the horses owned by the nation grew stronger and stronger". The Northern barbarian tribes in ancient China who came to settle in central China were proficient in animal

husbandry. Soghdian tombs were been found in Guyuan, Ningxia, and some owners of the tombs were horse breeding officials in the ranches of the central government. In the Tang Dynasty and the Song Dynasty, horse riding became a fashion, and people took pride in riding horses, especially on various grand occasions. The documents of the Song Dynasty *Yun Lu Man Chao* recorded: "From the Tang Dynasty to present, it was an etiquette to ride horses and wear court dress." The horse riding figurine can be found in tombs from the early Tang Dynasty to the flourishing period of the Tang Dynasty (Qi, 2000). There are also many records of women riding horses in the Tang Dynasty, which indicates that riding horse had become a part of the daily life of aristocratic women during this period. This can be verified by a lot of horse riding figurine with different gestures and different shapes unearthed from the tomb of the Tang Dynasty and other historical periods.

## The Horse Riding Ceremony for Military and Hunting

The strong military strength in the Tang Dynasty was not only based on its strong economy, but also

supported by its formidable cavalry (Denis,1990). Since the cavalry was formed in China during the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, it has developed rapidly due to its characteristics of lightness and rapidity. Later, since the Han Dynasty, the superiority of cavalry had become more and more prominent in the continuous wars between dynasties in central plains and the surrounding ethnic groups. During the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, one hundred thousand cavalries defeated the Huns, and since then, the cavalry has replaced chariots and become the main force in the ancient military affairs, meanwhile, the regimes of central plains had attached great importance to the construction of cavalry. In the Northern and Southern Dynasties, the cavalry occupied a more prominent position in the war between the northern and southern regimes. The appearing of cavalry equipped with heavy plate mail let people have a deeper understanding of the importance of the cavalry, especially the battle steed. The strong horse is the basic guarantee of cavalry construction, due to the life of the rider is as important as the life of the horse, "harness" was invented to protect war horses. Cavalry figurines with gold-overlaid armor unearthed from the tomb of Prince Yide in the Tang Dynasty belong to ceremonial horse riding figurines (Shanxi Provincial Museum,1972), however, both the riders and horses are heavily armored, which reflects the equipment level of the cavalry in the Tang Dynasty.<sup>1</sup>

1. A Horse Riding Figurine Unearthed in The Tomb of Prince Yide in the Tang Dynasty(Shanxi Provincial Museum,1972); 2. A Horse Riding Figurine Unearthed in the Tomb of Prince Yide in the Tang Dynasty(Shanxi Provincial Museum,1972); 3. A Horse Riding Figurine Unearthed in the Tomb of Princess Yongtai in The Tang Dynasty(Shanxi Provisional Cultural Relics Management Committee,1964); 4. A Horse Riding Figurine Unearthed in the Tomb of Princess Yongtai in The Tang Dynasty(Shanxi Provisional

In the Tang Dynasty, the emphasis on the cavalry was shown in daily life, and that was the preference for hunting on horseback. Records of the Tang Dynasty·Hunting recorded: Emperor Taizong of Tang once said "there are three best things in life for men: the first thing is that the whole world is at peace and every one of the family could have ample food and clothing; the second thing is that the grass is shallow and the beast is fat, and men can shoot with unflinching accuracy in ceremonial hunting; the third thing is that the regime is unified, so that people can hold feast frequently and everyone under the regimes can enjoy the happy life"(Wang,1991). Li Yuanji, brother of Emperor Taizong of Tang also said "I would rather not eat for three days than not hunt for a day"(Ou,1997). In the Tang Dynasty, hunting activities were very popular for the nobles and officials. The often used hound, cheetah, lynx, eagle, and snipe to help hunting, and depending on their good military skills and riding the running horse, they hunted animals and birds with traditional hunting weapon such as bow and arrow. The hunting on horseback figurine unearthed from the tomb of Prince Yide in the Tang Dynasty and the hunting figurine of Hu people (the Northern barbarian tribes in ancient China) unearthed from the main tomb in Jinxiang County, Baqiao (Xi'an Municipal Cultural Relics Management Committee,1997), Eastern Suburb of Xi'an, Shanxi reflect the popular scenes of hunting at that time. Such horse riding figurines have been found in many tombs of person with high social status in the Tang Dynasty, most of horse riders are male Hu people, which seems to indicate that Hu people had a certain natural

Cultural Relics Management Committee,1964); 5. A Horse Riding Figurine Unearthed in the Main Tomb in Jinxiang County (Xi'an Municipal Cultural Relics Management Committee,1997)

advantage in breeding and hunting animals. It is worth mentioning that some tombs have also unearthed figurine with women hunting on horseback. They were dressed in Hu clothing or menswear and riding on the galloping horse for hunting, the valiant image reflected the unique bold and unrestrained temperament of women in the Tang Dynasty.

### Prevailing Custom of Horse Riding in Daily Life

The Tang Dynasty had vast territory and prosperous economy. Meanwhile, the inter-ethnic relationship was very close. As the most important means of transportation in the economic and cultural exchanges of the people in the Tang Dynasty, horses played an irreplaceable role. In the early Tang Dynasty, there were imperial edicts forbidding craftsmen and traders from riding horses. But in the social life at that time, no other type of means of transportation was comparable with the function of horse riding instead of walk. With the development of economy and the mass reproduction of horses, horse-riding became a general travel method in people's daily life. In addition to highly-placed or high-ranking government officials, the literati, small tradesmen and porters, and even the servants in the palace often rode horses. Politics of the Tang Dynasty was stable, and the social hierarchy was very clear, when people attended all kinds of important meetings and royal ceremonial trips, they all took pride in riding horses, and riding good horses was also a symbol of noble status. According to the historical records, when the famous calligrapher Chu Suiliang rode home after finishing writing the Jade Booklet for Emperor Taizong of Tang, he might be overtired, and accidentally rode into other people's residence; Han Yu, a great litterateur,

"often rode horses in his spare time"; The poet Bai Juyi wrote that "ride a horse around the village with my thought stretching endlessly". Therefore, it was very common for literati to ride horses in the Tang Dynasty. Ladies in the imperial court and concubines were commonly seen traveling on horseback for pleasure in the Tang Dynasty. It was recorded in history that whenever Emperor Xuanzong of Tang went on a tour, "Imperial Concubine Yang accompanied him, riding a horse"; Madame Hanguo, Madame Guoguo and Yang Guozhong, Yang Yuhuan (Namely Imperial Concubine Yang)'s cousins, used to "have fun by riding horses"(Yang Tai Zhen Zhuan); The famous painter Zhang Xuan vividly depicted the scene of ladies in the court going out on horseback in *Madame Guoguo Going Sightseeing in Spring*.

Among the horse riding figurines unearthed from the tombs of the Tang Dynasty and the images of horseback riding on the murals of tombs, some riders were women. Through the modeling, clothing, posture and other characteristics, we can clearly see that these female riders came from different social classes, varying from ladies in the imperial court to their maids and maidservants (Qi,2006). According to the documents and physical data, horse riding among women had been quite popular in the Tang Dynasty, and this was not an accidental phenomena, but a general social fashion. Women in the Tang Dynasty were less constrained by feudal ethical code, and were able to participate in politics and discussion like men. They had certain social status and participated in various social activities more often.<sup>2</sup>

2 1.A Horse Riding Figurine Unearthed in the Tomb of Liuzhi and His Wife (Shanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology,2016); 2. A Horse Riding Figurine Unearthed in the Tomb of Wanglian and His Wife(Shanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology,2012); 3. A Horse Riding Figurine Unearthed in the Tomb of Yan Zhiwei and His Wife(Xi'an

The earliest female figure on horseback was unearthed from tomb of the Sui Dynasty, which was a painted female figurine of a lutanist. Currently, the figurine is collected in the Palace Museum. The rider was wearing a headband and tied it in front of her, a narrow sleeve shirt with red color and a long skirt with high waist, and playing the lute with both hands; Meanwhile, the female figures was sitting on the back of the horse, and the horse was glazed with yellow glaze. The limbs of the horse were sturdy, standing upright, and its head was low and deferential (Yan,2003). In the Tang Dynasty, there were a large number of female figurines on horseback. As the above mentioned, female figurines on horseback was found in the tombs of various periods of the Tang Dynasty, from a small number of female rider figurine in the early Tang Dynasty to a number of rich and diverse types of female rider figurine related to travel, music and dance, and sports, etc., these women were dressed in distinctive costumes, with vivid images and diverse models, and all of these reflected the increasing status of women in the Tang Dynasty with the development of society.

### 3. Horse Riding in Sports

In the Tang Dynasty, polo was a popular sport. From the royal families to the common people and even the palace maids, they took an active part in the sport and enjoyed it. It is said that polo originated in ancient Persia, and was firstly introduced to Turkey, and then introduced to Tubo (Tibetan regime in ancient China). In early Tang Dynasty, polo was introduced to the central plains

from Tubo, which first prevailed in the army and became a way of training cavalry and maintaining combat power in non-wartime. After getting the favor of the feudal aristocracy, it gradually became popular. There were many past master of polo in the court of the Tang Dynasty. During the Jingyun period during the reign of Emperor Ruizong of Tang (710-712), Li Longji, a prince at that time, had already been very good at polo (Li,1991). Seeing that the team of the imperial palace could not beat the team from Tubo, he led his four brothers to play against the team from Tubo and won the competition easily. Although the condition of the late Tang Dynasty was difficult, the emperor was still fond of polo. Li Xuan, Emperor Xizong of Tang, even boasted: "I must win the first place if there was examination about playing polo" (*Zi Zhi Tong Jian*). As recorded in historical documents, in the fifteenth year of Kaiyuan period (717AD), the Kingdom of Khotan in the Western Regions used to provide the good horses for the ruler of the Tang Dynasty to play polo; polo fields were throughout the palace city, forbidden garden, and noble mansion in Chang'an city. The documents also recorded the rules of polo in detail: "Every player was riding a horse, holding a long polo-stick with crescent moon shaped end and all the players would be divided into two groups, and they contest for one polo. A plate with a hole was in front of the south end of the court, and it would be equipped with a net; and the player who hit the ball into the hole would win" (*Jin Shi, Li Zhi*). The figurine playing polo was unearthed from the tomb of the Tang Dynasty in Guanshan, Lintong, Shanxi Province and the Chang'an Weidong Tomb (Zhao,1982). They vividly reappear the elegant demeanor of this popular sport in the Tang Dynasty. Meanwhile, the figurines playing polo unearthed in Weidong Tomb Tubo clothing,

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Institute of Cultural Relics Protection Archaeology,2014); 4. A Horse Riding Figurine Unearthed in the Tome of Madame Lianguo(Xi'an Institute of Cultural Relics Protection Archaeology,2016)

which indicates the close communication between the Tang Dynasty and the Tubo.

In the Tang dynasty, polo also attracted the attention of women in the palace. The female figurine unearthed in the tomb was riding on horseback, dressed in a sports suit, with a magnificent appearance, swinging a stick to hit the ball, galloping in the field, and enjoying the competitive activities that men were keen on. Lady Huarui wrote in *Palace Poem*: “Since women in imperial palace have been taught to play polo, women start riding horses”, Empress Dowager Yang also described the scene of “maid in an imperial palace plays polo with back” in *Palace Poem*: “When playing polo for pleasure, it is very necessary to ride on the horse back; In order to show new skills, players even play the polo quickly with their back”. The elegant demeanour of women who were excellent as their male colleagues can be seen everywhere in the Tang Dynasty.

### **Horse Riding for Amusement**

During the Tang Dynasty, due to the love and promotion of the rulers, the Court dance and music, folk music, and poetry were highly developed. A variety of music and dance institutions, such as the “Ten Kinds of Music” and “Sit and Stand up Kabuki”, representatives of the official specialized agencies, were also set up in the court. The nobles and public officials also had their own small-sized band dancing and playing music in their private residence to amuse themselves, which could be called private music and dance. This kind of small-sized band focused on the content of music and dance, and the way of performance was more free, at the same time, the distance between the performers and the viewers was closer and more

likely to generate resonance and communication. Some music and dance performances in the Tang Dynasty were also completed on horseback. Most of these performers and musicians were with low status, thus it indicated that horse riding was not a privilege for a few, but a daily tool that can be widely used by the public. A group of five painted figurines about female dancers on horseback unearthed in the main tomb in Jinxiang County, Eastern Suburbs of Xi’an, Shanxi, which vividly shows the scene of private music and dance performance.<sup>3</sup>

These female figurines had plump face, bright eyes and graceful eyebrows, elegant posture, wearing header caps or coronets, peacock caps, or having their hair done in a bun. They were dressed in man’s clothes with narrow sleeves and round collars, wearing pointed boots and fine clothes with different color and patterns. The five persons were playing waist drum, lute, vertical Konghou, cymbals, and wind instrument respectively. The horses rode by them were strong, vigorous, and powerful, with cut mane and tired tail, and standing upright on the floor.

“Since the Qin Dynasty and the Han Dynasty, horse riding had been most popular in the Tang Dynasty”(Ou, 1975). The love of horses in the Tang Dynasty is related to military achievements, status, and life. A large number of unearthed cultural relics and documents clearly reflect the social phenomenon that the people of the Tang Dynasty advocated riding horses. The horse also showed special status in the funeral objects of the Tang Dynasty, and relics relating to horses ranked the first among the similar funeral objects in terms

<sup>3</sup> 1. 2.A Horse Riding Figurine Unearthed in the Tomb of Liuzhi and His Wife(Shanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology,2016)

of quantity and type, which could be most directly and vividly reflected by all kinds of burial horse riding figurines in tombs. The horse riding figurine or the figurine of horses alone, as well as the figurine holding horses can be found in tombs of different periods of the Tang Dynasty. Horses, so to speak, played an important role in every aspect of people's daily life in the Tang Dynasty. Especially as the main riding tool, it was indispensable in military war, daily travel, ceremonial music and dance, as well as sports activities.

In conclusion, the Tang Dynasty was at the peak of the feudal society of China. The strong and unified multi-ethnic centralized state, the highly developed material and economic conditions, and the free, open, and inclusive ideology and culture jointly constituted the prosperous Tang Dynasty for more than two hundred years (Shen,2005). The prevailing horse riding fashion during this period was a miniature of the social life in the Tang Dynasty. Based on the method of archaeological typology, we have studied horse riding figurines unearthed in the tombs of the two capitals of the Tang Dynasty, and can summarize the general development characteristics of horse riding fashion in the Tang Dynasty, so as to understand the development of the society of the Tang Dynasty.

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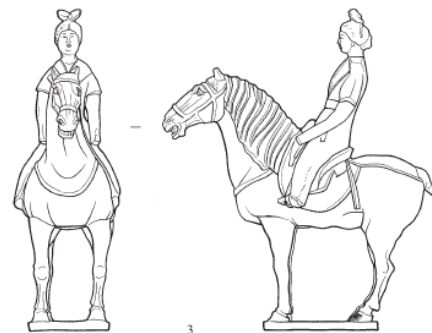
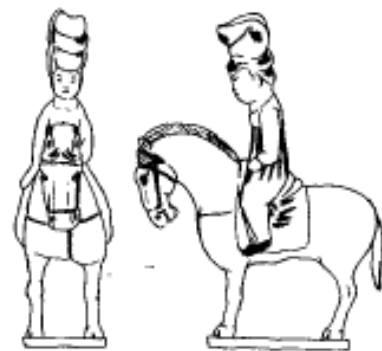
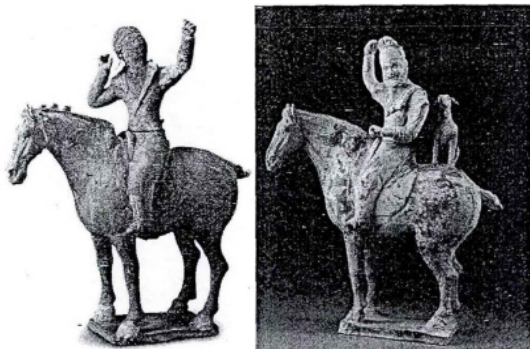
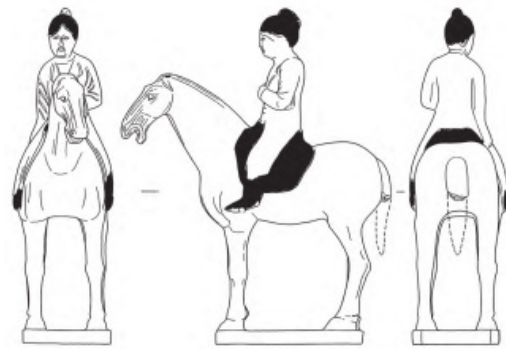


Figure 1— Horse Riding Figurines for Hunting in Chang'an Area



Figure 2— Female Horse Riding Figurines in Chang'an Area





Figure 3— Sports-related Horse Riding Figurines Unearthed from the Tomb of the Tang Dynasty



Figure 4— Type A Musicand Dance Related Horse Riding Figurines in Chang'an in Guanshan, Lintong(Zhao,1982)