The Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220), which opened up the Silk Road connecting China to the Roman empire, expanded its territory rapidly after succeeding to power. The Han empire reached as far as the Korean Peninsula in the east, Vietnam in the south and the Gansu Corridor - between the Mongolian and Tibetan Plateaus - in the west. The Han ruler further enjoyed the tributes paid by the kingdoms surrounding the Taklamakan Desert in Inner Asia. To extend its administrative control, the Han successfully fought the Xiongnu, whose nomadic empire dominated Mongolia (Di Cosmo 2002, pp. 161–252). Since horses played a significant role on the battlefield where the Han army faced the superb horsemen of the steppe, it is no surprise that horses also became a popular subject in Han art.

Among the best-known examples of Han horse art are the stone horses associated with the tomb of Huo Qubing (140–117 BCE), who greatly contributed to the Han defeat of the Xiongnu. Though born out of wedlock, Huo, a nephew of the Empress, became an attendant of emperor Wu (r. 140–87 BCE) when he turned eighteen. Proving adept at archery and horsemanship, he then joined the army led by his uncle Wei Qing (d. 119 BCE), the Empress's illegitimate half-brother, who had been fighting against the Xiongnu for years. Huo was brave and resourceful, and soon established a formidable reputation by winning against heavy odds. In 121 BCE, he performed several daring military exploits along the Gansu Corridor, between the Qilian Mountains and Juyan Lake. The soldiers under his command were said to have beheaded 40,000 enemies and taken 100,000 prisoners. He brought back important captives to the capital Chang'an, including six Xiongnu kings who ruled different sections of the Gansu Corridor (Watson 1961, pp. 193–216). Huo's victories severed the Xiongnu's ties with the Qiang of the Tibetan Plateau and with other kingdoms surrounding the Taklamakan Desert, which significantly weakened the Xiongnu and eased their threat to the Han empire. Huo's successes also allowed the Han empire to consolidate its control over the Gansu Corridor by establishing frontier commanderies there.

Huo Qubing's military achievements were so spectacular that they became a theme of his tomb furnishing. During his lifetime, Huo had enjoyed the favour of emperor Wu, who not only granted him titles – first the Champion Marquis and then the General of Swift Cavalry – but repeatedly enfeoffed him. By the time he died, at the young age of twenty-four, 14,100 households owed him fealty. Deeply grieved at the loss of the martial hero, emperor Wu allowed Huo to be buried in the vicinity of the Mao Mausoleum, a funerary park the emperor had built for his own afterlife. He even had a tumulus constructed above Huo's tomb in the shape of the Qilian Mountains. emperor Wu mobilised soldiers from the frontier commanderies to the capital; fully armed, they lined up from Chang'an to the Mao Mausoleum to take part in Huo's funeral (Watson 1961, p. 210). Both the allusion to the Qilian Mountains and the participation of the frontier army were intended to commemorate Huo's outstanding services to the throne.

Sculpted stones were placed on the tumulus, a detail omitted in contemporary official records but preserved in later local gazetteers. The photograph that Victor Segalen took in 1914 shows us how those stones may have appeared in the Han period (Fig. 1; Segalen 1978, pp. 27–42). The stones were shaped to look like a wide range of animals, including an ox, a boar, a toad, a tiger, an elephant and horses, but the most
impressive statue is the so-called Horse trampling a barbarian in front of the tumulus (Fig. 2; Paludan 1991, pp. 196–208). Approximately life-size, the statue represents a figure lying on the ground and crouching beneath a horse. The figure, with his large eyes and hairy features, has been identified as a Xiongnu soldier. Although he holds a bow, he appears helpless under the sturdy warhorse. Without doubt, the statue depicts a victory over the Xiongnu. One may wonder, however, whether the absence of a rider indicates the death of Huo Qubing, or whether the horse itself embodies the deceased general. In any case, the sculptor only roughed out the horse and the figure to preserve the bulk of the stone as much as possible. This unique style gives prominence to the nature of stone and accentuates volume, weight and durability, lending the symbolic conquest visible monumentality.

The funerary goods from another Han tomb, at Wuwei in Gansu province, are on display in this exhibition. They tell another story of a general and his horses (cat. no. 2). The seals found in the tomb identify the occupant as a general surnamed Zhang. The coins retrieved from the tomb suggest that he was not buried any earlier than 186 (Gansusheng bowuguan 1974, p. 108). By that time, it was the Qiang, not the Xiongnu, who plagued the Han regime, although the Xiongnu continued to compete with the Han for leadership in Inner Asia. The Gansu Corridor remained a region of strategic importance for all sides. By 186, Wuwei, a frontier commandery in the easternmost section of the Gansu Corridor, had been under the Han rule for three centuries. It was far more “civilised” than in Huo Qubing’s times, with an arm outpost, consolidated agriculture and flourishing trade. Though responsible for engaging in all sorts of border clashes, the general who supervised the army stationed at Wuwei normally had no need to lead an expedition hundreds of kilometres away as Huo Qubing did.

The bronze horses unearthed from the tomb at Wuwei reveal more about the social status of General Zhang than about his military performance. The tomb, though looted sometime over the centuries, still contained more than two hundred funerary goods. Among them were thirty-nine bronze horses, along with forty-five bronze figurines and fourteen bronze chariots. Since eight bronze horses carry inscriptions of ownership on their chests, we can divide the almost one hundred items into four groups: the cavalry unit, the escort of a person surnamed Zhang, the escort of a probationary magistrate named Zhang Ana, the escort of a probationary magistrate and battalion commander surnamed Zhang (Gansusheng bowuguan 1974, pp. 90–95). The four groups very likely indicate various stages of Zhang’s career, although they may or may not be a complete representation because of the looting. Except for the cavalry unit, each group is composed of several horses, chariots and servants presumably representing those at the disposal of Zhang and his wives.

The bronze horses in Zhang’s tomb are about one-fifth the size of a real horse; their height ranges from thirty-five to fifty centimetres. If the sculptor who made the statue for Huo Qubing’s grave emphasised the pliability and confidence of the horse, the artisans who produced the bronzes for Zhang’s captured its spirit and energy. Take for instance a cavalry horse (Fig. 3). One of its front hooves is raised as if the horse is about to race ahead. The tilted head, wide-open mouth and elevated tail display the impatience of the horse while promising
its power. The square jowls and muscular chest further accentuate its strength. This is the image of a well-built horse ready to be engaged in combat at any moment. The Han people apparently favoured this type of horse because clay and bronze horses with similar features have been discovered in many Han tombs across the country. The clay horse in this exhibition, excavated in Sichuan province and preserved in the collection of the Nanjing Museum, is but one example (cat. no. 124).

The most highly praised piece from Zhang's tomb is the horse setting foot on a flying bird (Fig. 4). More than spirit and energy, the artisan intended to convey speed through this imaginative yet impossible feat. Many scholars have taken delight in talking about the originality of the sculpture, but few have paid attention to its technical aspects. A careful comparison of this galloping horse and the cavalry horse shows that they differ only in the arrangement of the four legs. It is evident that each horse is composed of ready-made units. Employing the traditional piece-mould technology, Han artisans cast different parts of a horse and then welded together the larger units, such as the head and the neck, the body, and the four legs. Finally they fastened on the smaller components – the ears and the tail – with rivets (Gansusheng bowuguan 1974, p. 97). This method of working allowed the artisans to use moulds for mass-production while giving them room to fashion variations. A gifted artisan was able to create the fresh imagery of a horse atop a bird while following workshop routine.

The inspiration that associated a galloping horse with a flying bird likely came from the legend of the 'heavenly horses'. Huo Qubing and Wei Qing's victories did not come without price. The last large-scale battles they fought against the Xiongnu were in 119 BCE. We
are told that both generals led 140,000 horses on expeditions, but returned to the capital with less than 30,000 horses altogether. The Xiongnu were unable to recover after these ferocious attacks, which served the Han well, because the Han could not afford to wage more extensive war against the Xiongnu, owing to a severe shortage of horses (Watson 1961, pp. 209–11). Emperor Wu was, in any case, famous for his love of horses. When he heard that horses whose perspiration was as red as blood dwelled in Dayuan (the Ferghana Valley in present-day Uzbekistan), he decided to have some. Knowing that people of Dayuan had long coveted Han treasures, he dispatched envoys to trade for the horses. The Dayuan leaders showed no interest in bargaining and even killed the Han envoys, believing that the Han empire was too far away to pose a serious threat. They underestimated emperor Wu’s determination. Even though the Ferghana Valley was indeed thirteen thousand kilometres away from Chang’an, the emperor managed to mobilize soldiers and ruffians from the frontier commanderies for expeditions to Dayuan. Thirty thousand Han troops reached the capital of Dayuan in 101 BCE and, after besieging the city for forty days, forced the Dayuan leaders to surrender. Its mission accomplished, the Han army returned to the homeland with more than three thousand horses. Fewer than thirty were ranked the finest of the breed (Watson 1961, pp. 280–86). The choice horses from Dayuan were the so-called ‘heavenly horses’.

To commemorate the triumph, emperor Wu commissioned a song eulogizing the ‘heavenly horses’ and had it performed at court.

They have crossed the moving sands
The nine barbarians have been overthrown.

The heavenly horses arrived,
Emerging from the spring water.
Like tigers, their backbones are double,
They are charging like demons.

The heavenly horses arrived,
Passing through places without grass.
They covered the distance of one thousand li,
Following the route eastward.

The heavenly horses arrived,
In the year when Jupiter resided in the chen position.
Are they preparing to soar up into the air
At who knows what moment?
(Ban Gu 1962, pp. 1060–61)

The songwriter dramatized the superiority of the heavenly horses by comparing them to charging demons and double-backboned tigers. The imagery of ‘soaring into the air’ may have inspired the artisan who prepared General Zhang’s horse with a flying bird.

In the Mao Mausoleum, emperor Wu’s own funerary park, archaeologists discovered another possible representation of a ‘heavenly horse’ (Fig. 5). Measuring sixty-two centimetres in height, the gilt-bronze horse is both slim and tall. Its build is distinctly different from that of the stone horses on Huo Qubing’s grave, which was erected before the emperor acquired the ‘heavenly horses’.

The artisan who cast the gilt-bronze horse for the emperor may have had chances to inspect the ‘heavenly
horses' in person, but many others who would have liked to portray the legendary animal did not. Some of them translated the term into pictorial form by adding a pair of wings to a horse. The winged horse impressed on a hollow brick as seen in this exhibition is an example (cat. no. 8). Inevitably the ‘heavenly horse’ also became the mount of an immortal, another winged creature believed to dwell in the celestial field. A jade object excavated in Xianyang, approximately fifty kilometres from Chang’an, shows exactly that combination: a winged immortal riding on a winged horse (Fig. 6). The ‘heavenly horse’ was thus transformed from the booty of imperial expansion into a symbol of immortality in the Han popular imagination.
1  
**Fantastic animal**  
Eastern Han dynasty (25–220), second–third century  
Stone  
Height 108 cm, length 168 cm, width 43 cm  
Excavated in Fanghongqu, Sanqitunxiang, Luoyang, Henan province, in 1955  
Luoyang Museum of Ancient Art  

2  
**Guard of honour**  
Eastern Han dynasty (25–220), beginning of the third century  
Bronze  
A. Height 37.1 cm, length 36 cm  
B. Height 39 cm, length 37 cm  
C. Height 34 cm, length 34 cm  
D. Height 35 cm, length 33 cm  
E. Height 35 cm, length 33 cm  
F. Height 44 cm, length 56 cm, width 41 cm  
G. Height 44 cm, length 56 cm, width 41 cm  
H. Height 30 cm, length 70 cm, width 33 cm  
I. Height 30 cm, length 70 cm, width 33 cm  
L. Height 25.9 cm, length 67.1 cm  
Excavated from a tomb at Leitai, Wuwei, Gansu province, in 1969  
Gansu Provincial Museum
125
Woman playing with a goose
Tang dynasty, c. 665
Mural painting
Height 129 cm, length 99 cm
Excavated from the tomb of Li Zhen at Yanxiazheng, Liquanxian, Shaanxi province, in 1973
Zhaoling Museum

124
Horse
Eastern Han dynasty (25–220)
Earthenware
Height 113 cm, length 68 cm
Excavated at Pengshan, Huayangxian, Sichuan province, in 1942
Nanjing Museum
CHINA at the Court of the Emperors

Unknown Masterpieces from Han Tradition to Tang Elegance (25–907)

edited by Sabrina Rastelli