

EMPEROR TAIZONG AND HIS SIX HORSES (*Zhaoling Liujun*)

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Li Shimin, later known as Emperor Taizong, could be called the real founder of the Tang dynasty (618-906). After he assisted enthroning his father as the first ruler of the dynasty, he continued his military career by suppressing rivals who were threats to the newly established regime. He became emperor in 626 and ruled China for 23 years presiding over what later historians refer to as "Zhenguan Zhizhi" (the Zhenguan period of peace and prosperity).



Taizong had six favourite chargers who are closely connected with his major military triumphs. Not only did each horse have its own name, but each received a laudatory poem composed by the Emperor. Today, we have reliefs of these six horses: two in the Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and four in the **Stele Forest Museum (Beilin Bowuguan) in Xi'an**. The six reliefs, carved on stone slabs, flanked **Taizong's mausoleum (Zhaoling)**. The Emperor established the practice of building Tang imperial mausoleums along mountain slopes, and also decided to have his officials and immediate relatives buried in auxiliary tombs. The construction of the Zhaoling began in 636 and lasted 13 years until his death in 649. During this period and over the next 100 years, 185 auxiliary tombs were built continuously around the Zhaoling, forming a giant imperial cemetery which spread out like a fan on the south slope of the mountain. The tomb interior is said to be a replica of the imperial palace in the capital.

The six horses were placed outside the Emperor's tomb at the *ji tan* (sacrificial altar), a place for holding major memorial ceremonies. The altar occupied the entire north slope and was made of five platforms (some fragmentary bricks and architectural remains can still be seen). The horses most likely stood on the fifth platform, three on each side. They stood there for over a thousand years, but at the beginning of the 20th Century [May 1913], the horses were removed. The story goes that when peasants attacked the men who were discovered "transporting the horses away from the tomb", they threw the reliefs down a precipice, from where they were later recovered, cracked & broken). A Division Commander named Zhang Yunshan took two horses and gave them to the provincial Military Governor (Lu Jianzhang) to win his favour. Lu later sent them to Beijing to decorate the Yuan Imperial Garden of Yuan Shikai (the President of the Republic of China who was preparing to be crowned emperor). Who sold these two reliefs is unknown but they were in the US by March 1918 and bought by the Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology where today they are acknowledged as "the most important examples of Chinese sculpture outside China".

The four remaining horse reliefs were sent to the Shaanxi Provincial Library, and in the 1950s transferred to the Beilin Bowuguan, where they have been ever since. The Chinese still lament the loss of two of these famous six steeds. We will see the remaining four when we visit the Stele Forest Museum but because the stone horses were broken into pieces—fragments were still being found on Zhaoling in 2003—the arrows originally engraved on these outstanding horses are not clear, and the Emperor's poems and the horses' names cannot be seen easily.

1. **Te Qin Biao** had yellow and white hair and was ridden in battle ... in 619. Li Shimin did not take off his armour and the horse saddle for three full days during this battle. The horse is depicted walking steadily on an icy road, full of confidence before the battle.
2. **Qing Zhui**, a piebald, was ridden in battle ... in 621 and received five arrows from the front.
3. **Shi Fa Chi**, a brick-red horse, was ridden in battle ... in 621 and helped Li Shimin conquer two opponents in one battle. It was hit by four arrows from the front and one from the back.
4. **Bai Di Wu**, a black horse with four white feet, referred to as a "white-hoofed crow". Ridden in battle in 618. One night this charger carried Li Shimin for 200 li (about 100 km). Bai Di Wu is depicted in flying gallop.
5. **Sa Lu Zi** meaning "Autumn Dew" was also known as "Whirlwind Victory". This bay horse was ridden in 621. When the horse was hit by an arrow, General Qiu Xongong gave his own horse to Li Shimin. The relief depicts Qiu pulling an arrow out of Sa Lu Zi who is stoically bearing the pain. (This relief is the only one to include a man and is a specific portrayal of the event.) *In the Pennsylvania Museum*.
6. **Quan Mao Gua**, a saffron-yellow horse with a wavy coat of hair described as "Curly" was ridden in 622. The horse is shown walking briskly forward with rare spirit and animation despite grievous wounds sustained from nine arrows—six from the front and three from the back. *In the Pennsylvania Museum*.