

Social climbing on horseback

Equestrianism is making inroads in China, mainly as a flashy hobby for status-conscious upper-class Chinese

Rich Chinese are fast developing a taste for all kinds of Western luxuries from Rolls-Royce limousines to Chanel bags and Chateau Petrus wines to foreign-bred horses. Yes, horses. These days marketers on the mainland are using equestrian themes on billboards to sell villas, cars and even mobile phones. Indeed, owning horses has become a status symbol of choice for millionaire businessmen like Zou Jingqing, who spent Rmb20m (US\$2.9m) of his fortune made from his interior-decoration firm to open an equestrian club in the east-coast city of Qingdao.

Mr Zou bought horses from New Zealand and Germany to stock his 30,000-sq-metre Deray Horse Club. "It's the realisation of a childhood dream," says the portly businessman, who started to ride a decade ago during trips to Beijing and Shanghai. Speaking from his office which is plastered with photos of trips to stud farms in France, he says he next wants to share his love of equestrianism by building a hotel and entertainment complex around the club. A sign

pinned to a wall of the club's indoor arena says: "Deray is the right place for a holiday."

Fashion sport

Not many people would agree, given the club's location in grimy Jimo, an industrial hinterland of Qingdao. Nevertheless, it has good facilities for visitors willing to pay Rmb320 for an hour-long lesson. VIP members can get unlimited riding for Rmb48,000 per year. So far, 20 have signed up for VIP membership. But Mr Zou is confident he will have at least 200 by the end of the year, by which time the hotel and karaoke bar will be open. In the meantime, to find more work for its 30 horses, Deray's promotional literature evokes both the conquering power of the horse-riding Tang dynasty armies and the thrill of participating in a modern-day "fashion sport."

Sceptics think Mr Zou's dreams are galloping ahead of the reality. "Equestrianism is seen as

Horse-club promoters are even evoking Tang dynasty cavalries

Not many equestrian clubs in Beijing are profitable

fashionable now, but it's damn hard to make money from horses," says James Sun, general manager of Golden Horse, a Beijing-based horse-breeding and sales consultancy, which also runs a website listing equestrian events and fan groups (www.horseman-ship.cn). Only one-third of equestrian clubs in Beijing currently are profitable, he adds.

But then, horse riding is an expensive hobby anywhere. The bills start to pile up starting with the search for a good horse. Mr Sun reckons that about 1,000 Beijingers own horses, usually stabled at local equestrian clubs. Most of the horses at these clubs are retired race horses purchased for about Rmb50,000 each from Hong Kong and Macau tracks. Local breeds like the Yili are not tall enough to compete in equestrian events such as jumping or dressage. So for his clients, Mr Sun recently purchased three Akal Tel horses, flown 7,000 km from Turkmenistan. The horses cost Rmb1m each.

History is being repeated as Chinese horse enthusiasts try to put their country on the international equestrian map. In ancient times the Han dynasty launched a war in Central Asia to get the Alka Tel, a slim, fast steed, to improve Chinese cavalries. Today China needs the Alka Tel again, this time to improve the bloodstock of local equestrian teams. The Alka Tel is good value compared with the €1m (US\$1.6m) price tags for successful European show-jumping horses—although Chinese buyers are still dipping their toes and reluctant to spend more than €30,000 on an imported horse.

There is no shortage of foreign breeders keen to sell bloodstock to China. Equestrian bodies from Ireland, Germany, Russia and Spain travelled to an equestrian expo in Shanghai in November 2007. France's Union Nationale Interprofessionnelle du Cheval and the French Racing & Breeding Commission also have organised tours of French bloodstock farms for mainland visitors. Last year Mr Sun himself took a group of ten Chinese breeders and equestrian-club owners to the annual Performance Sales International auctions in Aachen, Germany.

China's ban on gambling at the racing track means this staple of every good bloodstock industry never took off in the country. If the situation were to change, "this would ease the current shortage of horses and improve equestrian know-how in China," says Yiu Kak, vice-president of the Beijing Turf and Equestrian Association. Racing would catch

Betting on horse racing is banned in China

race is Wuhan. Its Jockey Club is one of several exploratory racing organisations that have been set up in anticipation of the ban being relaxed. According to Mr Yiu, five years of persistent lobbying by its Hong Kong investors got the Wuhan club the green light for trial races in September. The government, however, still has not granted permission to bet on horses, though it has hinted that this may be allowed in 2009.

To raise the popularity of the sport among Chinese, equestrian advocates also realise that they need to promote it with more events and media coverage. In 2008 the Beijing Turf and Equestrian Association will oversee 20 events, including dressage, jumping and no-gambling racing. But "we need more promotion," says Mr Yiu, who already subsidises his Clearwood Stud, a 75-acre breeding centre and club with 80 horses, with earnings from a car dealership. "If nobody helps, this sport might die out."

Small prize

He would like to see more local government involvement. Others are not sure if bureaucrats, rather than equestrian experts, should lead the effort. More corporate sponsorship may be useful. But the sport's small support base discourages advertisers—stewards regularly outnumber spectators at events in Beijing. World equestrian champions own their own horses and tour the world to compete for prize money often worth €500,000 per event. In contrast, the winning team in China's 2007 national championships shared a prize pot of Rmb20,000, sponsored by a hodgepodge of local corporations, including a dressmaker in Nanjing.

"The Chinese, not being nomads, are not used to horses," Mr Yiu says. Still, he and other equestrian boosters are optimistic. The Beijing Turf and Equestrian Association counts 75 clubs (13 of which have racing events) among its membership. And three polo clubs opened in Beijing in the past three years. "That's something, considering a successful polo player needs half a dozen ponies to compete," notes Mr Yiu.

This is after all China, a country of outsized possibilities and fast multiplying tycoons who are impatient to outdo their Western peers. Mr Sun remembers being awed by the third largest stud farm in France with 200 horses. But he predicts, "there will be farms of 1,000 horses here someday." Why does he think

on quickly in Beijing, which has three tracks, says Mr Sun. One city where horses will soon be allowed to

so? Because in China, "bosses always have to be big."