

# A New Chinese Dynasty

## Emerging dressage in China

By Natalie DeFee Mendik

**D**ancing white horses, ornate architecture and performances filled with grace and pomp. This isn't one of the famed baroque riding schools in Europe, but rather the Heilan International Equestrian Club in XinQiao, an outer suburb of Shanghai, China. While most Americans have no idea a dressage mecca in China is in the making, Heilan International Equestrian Club has been busy importing horses from Europe and the United States, constructing a jaw-dropping facility and training a legion of riders.

The highlight of Heilan's equestrian program is the weekly sold-out riding exhibition, narrated in Mandarin, performed every Saturday evening with mid-week encore performances during the high season. Four main carousel segments form the heart of the show, featuring groups of choreographed dressage horses and riders. The first is made up of 14 warmbloods, the second of 30 PREs and Lusitanos, the third of 32 Friesians and the fourth of the 62 PREs, Lusitanos and Friesians together. The jumping portion of the show includes three horse-rider combinations from the Jiangsu Province team. The driv-

ing portion of the show features separate teams of miniature horses, Friesians and PREs. Then PREs perform in-hand *haute école* work, including levades, pesades, courbettes and caprioles. The speed portions of the show include a

"Zorro" performance and barrel racing with American Quarter Horses. The finale brings all 70 horses together for a final salute.

Heilan International Equestrian Club gives us a window into the other side of the world, where the seeds of equestrian sport are being sown. In 2011, China joined the ranks of countries hosting FEI Show Jumping with the debut of three CSI\* FEI World Cup Jumping Qualifier competitions. "Equestrian sports are still very much in the developmental stages here," explains American Ana Gilmour, a dressage trainer employed at Heilan. "Most people in China know nothing about horses and most certainly have never seen a sport horse in person. Many have only ever seen them as a mode of transportation. In fact, many roads in the small villages throughout China are still used only by horses."

Slated as a top venue for both domestic and international training and showing, the Heilan club began in 2007 and now owns more than 300 horses, most of which were imported from Europe and the United States. These include Dutch Warmbloods, Hanoverians, Friesians, PREs, Lusitanos, Quarter Horses, various breeds of ponies and even miniature horses used for driving. There also are a number of local purebred and crossbred Chinese horses. The main breed of Chinese horse at Heilan is the Yi Li, a small, agile and hardy breed. All the dressage horses have a good training foundation and have been schooled from Second Level through Grand Prix. Recently, Heilan imported a group of young horses so riders can learn how to start them.

The stable has the capacity to house all the horses and boasts three enormous

**Ana Gilmour  
outside the Heilan  
International Equestrian  
Club grounds**



Courtesy, Shen Hou Feng



indoor riding halls as well as a comprehensive on-site private veterinary clinic. Amenities for the horses include a newly built two-story barn outfitted with dual three-horse elevators, equine swimming pool, round pen, Eurociser and enough wash racks to accommodate an army of horses. The exhibition riding hall, or coliseum, features crystal chandeliers, mural artwork and pillars. "I have never seen such a grandiose indoor arena. It's like something out of a movie," says Gilmour. With a 40-foot bronze fountain, hand-carved cherry-wood accents, marble floors, stone carvings, fresh flowers, state-of-the-art footing and comfortable seating for 600 people, no detail has been forgotten. And what equestrian venue wouldn't be complete without a bar, nightclub, riding-apparel boutique, restaurants and luxury hotels?

More than 300 employees are needed at the equestrian facility alone, including office staff, trainers, barn help, riders, maintenance crew, translators and hospitality staff. A team of veterinarians staffs the on-site veterinary clinic. They include Dr. Joop Loomans, a professor at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands, and Dr. Chang Ming Bai from China. The center's farriers are from Holland, Mongolia and China.

The 125 riders (70 female, 55 male) from China and Mongolia are paid to learn the art of riding and to perform in the exhibitions. They range in age from late teens to early 20s, and came to Heilan's apprentice system with little or no equestrian background. "Of the 55 male riders, about five or six of them had ridden a horse before they arrived at Heilan," notes Gilmour. "However,

this refers to having ridden Chinese horses, often bare-back just for fun. The exception to this is the riders on the Jiangsu Province team, who have more horse experience in their background. Of the 70 female riders, none of them had ridden a horse before arriving at Heilan."

Gilmour explains that most of the women were art students whose focus was music, dance or theater before arriving at Heilan. Many of the young men are from small villages in other regions of China and Mongolia, and are married, often with a young child. The training and teaching staff consists of nine full-time trainers: six Spanish, who are graduates of the Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art in Jerez, Spain; one Portuguese; one German and Gilmour, the only American as well as the sole female trainer. Gilmour was introduced to Heilan through Lisa Hurlong, an American based in Spain who acts as an agent for Heilan.

The equestrian center's working language is a mix of Mandarin, Spanish, German and English. Each trainer is assigned one of the 10 full-time translators, and training sessions with the riders always have translators in attendance. "Working with a translator is tricky at first, but it becomes easier as time goes by," says Gilmour. "You must build a rapport between trainer, rider and translator. It's interesting

to watch trainers that have been at the facility since its inception and have been with a translator for that period of time. There's a flow between them. The trainer speaks, and the translator is right on it, echoing him. You see the change in the rider. It's a cool thing to watch. An experienced translator understands what the trainer is talking about and is watching the horse, too."

While the weekly public performances are the highlight of the week and serve the added function of keeping everyone on their toes, Gilmour explains that the biggest effort is placed in the daily training of riders and horses.

In between riding her own horses, Gilmour and her translator assist students in mini-lessons throughout the day, focusing on skills like in-hand work, piaffe and passage. Gilmour's teaching style, however, has had to undergo a creative rebirth since arriving at Heilan. "As a trainer

at Heilan, it takes tremendous patience as well as creativity in order to find ways of explaining the most essential and fundamental principles of riding that you and I might take



Courtesy, Ana Gilmour

### Heilan International Equestrian Club





## Living & Working in China: Ana Gilmour's Perspective

**X**inQiao lies outside Zhangjiagang, a city with a population of 1.3 million. So, as you can imagine, when I arrived here, everyone kept telling me that XinQiao is "very small town." However, to me it has the bustling feel of a big city with streets full of cars, buses and people walking or biking back and forth to work.

I am the only person with blond hair in the area. Although I have been here since May 2011, the looks are still long and people are still fascinated with how different I look from them. I suppose someone mentions my eyelashes at least four times a week. Few people speak English here, so it was only a matter of time before I learned *jié máo*—the Mandarin word for eyelashes. Local people often ask to take pictures with me.

My day begins when I meet one of our drivers outside the five-star hotel where I live in the town center. When I arrive at the

club, the coffee bar is full of riders in breeches and boots chatting, laughing and eating breakfast that they bought from nearby street vendors. I grab my gear, get a coffee to go and head out the door to start my riding.

I was hired as a rider, rather than an instructor, so I ride an average of 10 to 12 horses per day. I teach about five lessons per week as well as give a theory class every week. I usually finish my evening with a workout at the gym or dinner with friends. Or I join the locals on the street corner to enjoy an authentic Chinese barbeque (which is not at all like an American barbeque, but every bit as delicious).

Fireworks are everywhere in China. Many times I am startled by these loud blasts, but the horses here have become accustomed to the noise and continue seamlessly with their work. Music is also played loudly. From where I ride, I hear the faint melodies of traditional Chinese music almost daily. The music seems to float up and over the city, dancing through the hustle and bustle of daily life and slowly settling back down to earth.

**Ana Gilmour** has ridden in Spain, Italy, Morocco, Jordan and now China. In addition, this USDF Certified Instructor has trained with Hilda Gurney, Rachel Satory-Saavedra, Kevin Babington, Lendon Gray and Courtney King-Dye. After nine months in China, Ana has returned to Northern California to open her own business ([anagilmour.com](http://anagilmour.com)).

for granted," remarks Gilmour. "Something I learned quickly here is that you must explain things differently than you would in English, and you have to do it efficiently. Teaching revolves around dialogue and timing, especially at the upper levels. Sometimes during a ride there are very small windows of opportunity in which we can influence the horse most effectively. Touching with the whip a half second too late can make a big difference. The main challenge while teaching here is trying to avoid losing these moments."

Another valuable tool is the weekly theory class Gilmour leads together with Spanish trainer Raul Roa Vadillo. "This is a time when we can really dive into the concepts of riding, listen to questions, share thoughts, watch videos and discuss training methods without the pressures of schedule and horse condition that are sometimes felt within the training hall."

Learning to ride correctly is critical to the riders' employment at Heilan, and their dedication pays off. "The most incredible thing about the riders is how quickly they advance," says Gilmour. "I am working with young people who haven't had a riding background, but within months, they are learning advanced movements such as flying changes, shoulder-in and half pass. Since the riders here are employees, it is required that they advance their level of riding in a timely manner."

This progression is possible through systematic and rigorous steps, including access to advanced-level dressage horses and the intensive amount of daily training the riders receive. Riders start out on the longe on Chinese horses for several months with the more advanced riders teaching newcomers. Later, longe line lessons are given to each rider every week. As riders progress, they are permitted to enter a training program with

Courtesy, Ana Gilmour



**Ana (center) with equestrians Tian Jing (left) and Bao Yingfeng**



the foreign trainers riding the imported horses. Finally, when the trainers feel they are ready, riders are included in the weekly show.



Weekly tests, dress rehearsals and large meetings that include video critiques play a big part in ensuring that each rider is making progress. "We watch video footage on a huge video screen taken from six different camera angles of each rider involved in the show and discuss strengths and where improvements can be made," says Gilmour.

Does China have an eye on international competition? "They have the means and the horses," notes Gilmour. "This is certainly an endeavor to bring horses into the limelight in China and for China to establish itself in the equestrian arts. There is most certainly a plan for China to compete internationally in the future, and it has already begun in the show-jumping arena. But if China is after one thing, it is greatness. If they do not feel ready to win, they will most likely stay home and practice rigorously until they do feel ready to win, and then come out swinging," notes Gilmour.

To really get a sense of Heilan International Equestrian Club, take a look at the center and performances online at [heilanequestrian.com](http://heilanequestrian.com) and The Heilan Group at [heilan.com.cn](http://heilan.com.cn). More about horse sports in China is available at China Equestrian Association's site, [horse.org.cn](http://horse.org.cn). 📺

**SEE MORE** photos of trainer Ana Gilmour and the Heilan International Equestrian Club at [dressagetoday.com](http://dressagetoday.com)



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