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A re-examination of the meaning of “six horses” in Du Fu’s Raising the Banner

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Abstract. This paper re-examines the intended meaning of the term “six horses” (liuma) in Du Fu’s poem Raising the Banner (Yangqi). Through an analysis of both its symbolic imagery and literal description, and in light of Du Fu’s political thought, Tang dynasty conceptions of “six horses,” and the flag policy of military governors during the Guangde era, the paper argues that the term does not refer to the metaphorical “six-horse imperial chariot,” the image of “six horses raising their heads for feed,” or the misreading of “five horses and one dapple-gray horse” as suggested by earlier scholars. Instead, the “six horses” are a literal reference to cavalrymen bearing six dao banners (liudaoqi). The article first traces the image of “six horses” in Wen Xuan and Complete Tang Poems, observing its frequent association with emperors or auspicious symbolism. Then, based on the Tang military banner system and Yan Wu’s identity as a military governor, it demonstrates that “six horses” refers specifically to the cavalry entering the field while bearing six large banners.

Keywords: Du Fu’s poetry, Raising the Banner, six horses, six dao banners

1. Introduction

Raising the Banner (Yangqi) is a poem composed by Du Fu in the sixth month of the second year of the Guangde era, when he had just joined Yan Wu’s military headquarters and accompanied him in inspecting his troops. The term “six horses” (liuma) in the poem has sparked much scholarly debate. Professor Xie Siwei interprets it as synonymous with the “five horses and one dapple-gray horse” (wuma yima cong) from Winter Hunting March (Dongshouxing) [2]. Qiu Zhaoaoshing, drawing on the Mao Commentary to the Book of Songs, suggests that even a high-ranking official (dafu) could be drawn by six horses, citing the phrase “a fine horse, six in all” (liang ma liu zhi) [3]. Professor Xiao Difei, however, challenges both views. He argues: “‘The governor rides five horses and one dapple-gray horse’ refers to a dapple-gray among the five horses, not evidence for a six-horse team. In The Book of Songs, ‘A fine horse, six in all’ refers to the ritual gifts presented in the recruitment of virtuous men, not to a six-horse chariot for officials.” He further references Han Feizi, which states, “Hunters trust the stability of the chariot and rely on the strength of six horses,” suggesting that “six horses” may have become a conventional expression [4]. However, he does not provide a definitive interpretation of the term “six horses” as it appears in Raising the Banner.

2. The common understanding of the “six horses”

Imagery in the Early and High Tang PeriodsThe idea of the “emperor’s six-horse chariot” (tianzi jia liuma) was first recorded in Yili: Wangdu Ji (The Lost Rites: Record of Royal Protocol). By the Han dynasty, debates arose over whether the emperor’s chariot should be drawn by four or six horses—a controversy that remains unresolved to this day [5]. However, the use of the “six horses” expression in Raising the Banner should be understood within the ideological context of Du Fu’s own time. Therefore, the author argues that it is unnecessary to dwell excessively on the debates concerning “six horses” across different dynasties. It is sufficient to examine the prevailing ideas of “six horses” during the Early and High Tang periods, as well as the works that may have influenced Du Fu.

2.1. The “six horses”

Imagery in Wen XuanAs one of the most significant anthologies of poetry and prose prior to the Tang dynasty, the Wen Xuan, compiled by Crown Prince Zhaoming, exerted considerable influence on Tang literati, including Du Fu. Ge Lifang noted: “Du Fu

was fond of using language from the Wen Xuan, and thus his son Zongwu also studied it extensively. This is what Du meant by 'Thoroughly versed in Wen Xuan's principles, no need to seek flowery robes for show,' and also, 'Call for the maid to bring the wine jar; instruct the child to continue reading Wen Xuan.'" [6] Guo Siyun further observed: "In terms of poetic learning, Du Fu is often said to be without equal—preceded by none, followed by none. Yet if one examines his poetry, it largely follows the stylistic tradition of the Wen Xuan, selecting its refined essence, gathering broadly and exploring deeply, digesting and transforming it into his own language." [7] These remarks suggest that familiarity with Wen Xuan offers insight into Du Fu's diction. Within Wen Xuan, the imagery of "six horses" appears in a total of eight instances.

First, in Ban Gu's Rhapsody on the Western Capital (Xi Du Fu), we read: "Thus, he rode in the imperial chariot, fully arrayed in ceremonial regalia, leading his ministers, parting the wind with flying banners, and entered through the garden gate." Cai Yong's Duan Duan explains: "Because the emperor holds the utmost dignity, people did not dare speak of him too directly, and thus referred to his presence indirectly through the term 'imperial chariot' (chengyu)." He adds: "When the emperor goes out, the chariot procession follows a prescribed order, which is called the lubu, and includes the fajia (ritual chariot)." Sima Biao clarifies: "The fajia is drawn by six horses." The Annals of Emperor Wu in the Book of Han (Han Shu) records: "In Chang'an, the Feilian Pavilion was constructed." [8] In the original text of Rhapsody on the Western Capital, terms such as luanyu ("imperial chariot") and fajia ("ritual chariot") are used to refer to the emperor's vehicle, though "six horses" are not explicitly mentioned. However, Xiao Tong's original annotation to Wen Xuan indicates that these terms are synonymous with the concept of "six horses," and directly associates them with that imagery.

Second, in Zhang Heng's Rhapsody on the Western Capital (Xi Jing Fu), it is written: "Then the Son of Heaven mounted the engraved carriage, drawn by six mottled steeds." The annotation explains: "'Engraved' (diao) refers to painted decoration. The Son of Heaven rides a chariot drawn by six horses. Bo (mottled) refers to white horses with black markings in patterns resembling a tiger." [9]Xiao Tong treats the terms "engraved carriage" (diao zhen) and "six mottled steeds" (liu jun bo) as synonymous with the idea of "six horses." As in the previous example, this reinforces the association between imperial chariots and the six-horse motif.

Third, in Zhang Heng's Rhapsody on the Eastern Capital (Dong Jing Fu), it states: "The six dark dragons, radiant in their strength, surged forward in unison, leaping with majestic force." The annotation explains: "'Six' refers to the six horses. Xuan means black. The Son of Heaven rides a chariot drawn by six black horses." [10]Xiao Tong equates "six dark dragons" (liu xuan qiu) with "six horses," once again reinforcing the symbolic association of a six-horse imperial team with imperial dignity and grandeur.

Fourth, in Zuo Taichong's Rhapsody on the Wei Capital (Wei Du Fu), we read: "When powerful enemies stirred unrest and the realm knew no peace, sacred might rose to proclaim its awe-inspiring power. Armored ranks advanced in layers, banners and flags fluttered and rose. Bows gleamed with jade inlays as they bent against great wooden frames, spears flashed with brilliance. Troops clad in threefold armor trailed ribbons like those of Han and Hu. Drawing bows and loosing arrows, they rivaled the skill of Geng Ying." According to historical records, in the nineteenth year of the Jian'an reign (214 CE), Cao Cao was granted the title Duke of Wei and ranked above all other lords, donning a red ribbon and yuanyou crown. In the twenty-first year, he was elevated to the rank of king. In the twenty-second year, he was granted the full imperial paraphernalia: the right to bear the Son of Heaven's banners, the protocols of imperial military and court movements (chujing and rubi), a vermilion crown with twelve tassels, a golden-chassis chariot drawn by six horses, and the establishment of the Taichang (Imperial Ministry of Ceremonies) with auxiliary vehicles for all five seasonal rites. [11]According to Xiao Tong's annotation, in the twenty-second year of Jian'an, Emperor Xian of Han granted Cao Cao the use of imperial regalia, including the six-horse chariot. Regardless of whether the rhapsody contains veiled criticism of Cao Cao, the ceremonial honors he received were those reserved for the emperor. Therefore, in this context, the "six horses" once again symbolize imperial authority. Same as above.

Fifth, in Sima Changqing's Rhapsody on the Imperial Park (Shanglin Fu), it reads: "Then, through autumn and winter, the Son of Heaven went on imperial hunts, riding a chariot carved with ivory elephants, drawn by six jade-colored dragons." Zhang Yi explains: "Louxian ('carved elephant') refers to the carriage decorated with carved ivory. The 'six jade dragons' (liu yu qiu) denote the six horses pulling the chariot, their bridles and reins adorned with jade ornaments, resembling dragons." [12]Xiao Tong agrees that the phrase "six jade dragons" is synonymous with the emperor's six horses, consistent with earlier interpretations.

Sixth, in Jiang Wentong's Separate Rhapsody (Bie Fu), it is written: "Pearls and jade gleam brightly in the late autumn, silks and brocades bloom charmingly in early spring. The startled four-horse team lifts their heads to feed, while the abyssal fish shows its crimson scales." This passage expresses the exuberance of joy. The Han Shi Wai Zhuan records: "Long ago, Boya played the qin and the deep-water fish came forth to listen; Huba played the qin and the six horses lifted their heads to feed." The Rhapsody on the Calming Qin by Duke Cheng states: "Boya struck the strings and the four horses lifted their heads; Ziye waved his hand and the black crane called." [13]The phrase "lifting heads to feed" (yang mo) first appears in Xunzi: "Long ago, Huba played the se while the sinking fish came forth to listen; Boya played the qin and the six horses lifted their heads to feed." [14] The sound of Huba's se attracted the fish to peek out, while Boya's qin music made the horses raise their heads in appreciation—praising the beauty of music. Though the rhapsody uses "four horses lifting heads to feed" rather than "six horses," the phrase here likely borrows the meaning of "six horses lifting heads to feed," symbolizing beautiful scenery. For the sake of this paper, the term yang mo will be unified under the meaning of "beauty and grace."

Seventh, in Ma Jichang's Long Flute Rhapsody with Preface (Chang <Di Fu> Bing Xu), it states: "The metal fish murmur along the water's edge, as the four-horse team raises their heads and the black cranes dance." The Han Shi Wai Zhuan says: "Long ago, Boya played the qin and the fish came forth to listen; Huba played the qin and the six horses raised their heads to feed." [15]In this rhapsody, the phrase "raising the four horses' heads" (yang si ma) similarly alludes to the "six horses raising their heads to feed" (ma yang mo), paired with "dancing black cranes" to evoke imagery of beauty and joy. The interpretation remains consistent with earlier usages.

Eighth, in Zhang Jingyang's Seven Fate Poems, Eight Pieces (Qi Ming Ba Shou), it states: "The prince brushes aside his tassel and inclines his ear; the six horses exhale to the heavens and raise their heads to feed... This is surely the utmost wonder of music. Could you follow me and listen?" The Liexian Zhuan records: "Prince Qiao, the crown prince Jin of King Ling of Zhou, when he played the sheng, phoenixes sang. The Liji states: 'Incline your ear and listen.' Sun Qingzi said: 'Long ago, Huba played the se and the metal fish came forth to listen; Boya played the qin and the six horses raised their heads to feed.'" [16]In this rhapsody, "six horses raising their heads to feed" (liu ma yang mo) is used to praise the beauty of music. The interpretation is consistent with previous examples.

Upon examining these eight rhapsodies, two distinct categories of the "six horses" imagery emerge. First, the notion of the "Son of Heaven riding six horses." Although the original texts of the first five rhapsodies do not explicitly mention the term "six horses," Xiao Tong's annotations clearly indicate that the various terms referring to imperial outings are synonymous with "six horses." Second, the concept of "six horses raising their heads to feed." The sixth rhapsody conveys the idea of beautiful scenery, the seventh symbolizes pure joy, and the eighth praises the beauty of music. Therefore, from Wen Xuan, two definitions of "six horses" can be derived, with the dominant and mainstream understanding being the "Son of Heaven riding six horses."

2.2. The imagery of "six horses" in complete Tang Poems

The poetry of early and mid-Tang literati largely reflects their predominant understanding of the "six horses" imagery during that period. Among the early and mid-Tang poems collected in Complete Tang Poems (Quan Tang Shi), only Yu Shinan's poem Responding to the Imperial Order at Shouchun (Fenghe Zhi Shouchun Yingling) employs the term "six horses."

The lines read: "The rear carriage resounds with phoenix flutes, the front banners gleam with colorful tassels. The dragon chariot halts the six horses, the flying pavilion ascends the triple platform." This poem was composed by Yu Shinan as a tribute while accompanying the emperor on a journey. The rear carriage plays wind instruments, while colorful flags flutter ahead as the emperor's chariot ascends the raised platform. These two couplets vividly depict the grandeur of the imperial procession. Here, "dragon chariot" (long can) refers to the emperor's carriage, so the phrase "halts the six horses" (zhu liu ma) should be understood as a literal description of six horses stationed before the carriage.

In summary, the imagery of "six horses" in both Wen Xuan and Complete Tang Poems can be categorized into three types: the notion of the "Son of Heaven riding six horses," the "six horses raising their heads to feed" metaphor expressing beauty, and the literal depiction of "six horses."

3. Nuances of the meaning of "six horses" in Yang Qi

In the poem Yang Qi (Raising the Banner), there are twelve lines describing the military review. The lines read: "At the initial feast, the troops in armor parade, arrayed to illuminate the vast courtyard. The courtyard clears as six horses enter, steads tall and strong, raising banners and flags. Circling and turning, the fluttering canopies bow; sparkling like shooting stars they burst forth. Winds whip fiercely as they approach; mountains seem to collapse as they pass. Weapons return lowered, skillfully adjusting to level the ground. Rainbows and clouds fit within the grasp; flags unfurl lightly at the bearer's will." The last eight lines primarily depict the soldiers waving flags in grand display, which is beyond the scope of this study focusing on the "six horses," and will thus be set aside. The first two lines, "At the initial feast, the troops in armor parade, arrayed to illuminate the vast courtyard," depict Du Fu arriving with Yan Wu and first seeing the gleaming armor of the soldiers shining upon the earth, indicating the military review had not yet officially begun. The following two lines, "The courtyard clears as six horses enter, steads tall and strong, raising banners and flags," describe the beginning of the review, when six tall and fine horses enter the empty review ground, holding banners that flutter continuously. This is then followed by the subsequent eight lines describing the waving of the banners, showing the entire twelve lines are presented in chronological order.

3.1. Dialectical examination of the "six horses" as a figurative image

As discussed above, prior to Du Fu, the term "six horses" commonly appeared in two symbolic images: "the Son of Heaven riding six horses" and "six horses raising their heads to feed."

First, the notion of the "Son of Heaven riding six horses." In his early years, Du Fu upheld political ideals of "serving Confucianism and maintaining office" and "delivering the ruler to the heights of Yao and Shun," embodying a loyal minister's devotion exemplified by "not daring to forget the ruler even after one meal." Even in his later years, plagued by illness, Du Fu

continued to "cherish his master with a sincere heart" (from The Arrival of Liusi Ma), quietly concerned about the court's affairs and Emperor Daizong's safety. This proves Du Fu was a traditional Confucian scholar who valued the Three Bonds and Five Constants and the rites between sovereign and subject. Therefore, the interpretation that associates "six horses" with the emperor's carriage, i.e., the Son of Heaven's six horses, fundamentally conflicts with Du Fu's political philosophy. Hence, in this context, "six horses" should not be understood as a reference to the "Son of Heaven riding six horses." This also refutes Qiu's annotation suggesting that "dafu (high officials) may also ride six horses."

Second, the "six horses raising their heads to feed" metaphor. This poem was composed to praise Yan Wu's army. Terms such as "fluttering canopies bowing," "shooting stars bursting forth," "winds whipping fiercely," and "mountains collapsing" all create an atmosphere of vigorous and heroic energy. While "six horses raising their heads to feed" conveys a positive and beautiful image, its gentle, soft tone inevitably clashes with the poem's robust mood. Moreover, if "six horses" here were to imply a beautiful metaphor, then the word "enter" (ru) would be difficult to explain.

Excluding the above figurative interpretations, the author believes that the "six horses" in Yang Qi should not be regarded as a purely symbolic term. Upon consulting Tang dynasty military flag regulations, it appears that these "six horses" likely refer to cavalry soldiers mounted while carrying six dao banners (liudaoqi), constituting a literal description.

3.2. Dialectical analysis of the literal description of the "six horses"

According to Mr. Dong Haipeng's Study on the Use of Military Flags in the Tang Dynasty, the Tang military commonly employed five types of flags during training and combat: dao banners, gate flags, five-direction flags, unit flags, and identification flags. The "six dao banners" (liudaoqi) refer specifically to six large flags each topped with a dao (banner head). [17] Relevant historical materials are as follows:

"The system of the patterned dance: the left hand holds a yue (ritual tablet), the right hand holds a di (feather ornament); two people each hold a dao banner to lead it. The patterned dance consists of sixty-four participants, performed for the suburban temple ceremonies. Their attire includes a formal hat with hanging silk tassels, dark silk large sleeves, a white linen collar with an insignia, a white gauze inner robe, crimson collar insignia, crimson cloth with wide cuffs, leather belts, black leather shoes, and white cloth socks. The banner holders wear identical clothing and hats." [18]

"The Zhou Cao managed all the military units' weapons and equipment under various departments, as well as the construction of their official offices and matters of adjudication and punishment. During major court assemblies and processions, the Zhou Cao would provide the Azure Dragon banner, the six dao banners (liudaoqi), spears, and similar items to the Weiwei (Imperial Guard). Once the affairs were completed, these items were returned to their original place." [19]

"From the second year of Jingyun, in the fourth month, He Ba Yansi was appointed as the Military Governor (Dudu) of Liangzhou and concurrently served as the Hexi Jiedushi (Military Commissioner of Hexi). Subsequently, various circuits adopted this title, which granted them exclusive military authority and power to execute punishments. When on campaign, they established their own jie (military banners), with their headquarters displaying six dao banners (liudaoqi), the highest honor among external appointments." [20]

During the Tianbao era, along the frontier regions tasked with defending against the Rong tribes, eight military governors (jiedushi) were established. Upon appointment, they were granted military banners called jingjie, earning the title of jiedushi and receiving exclusive military command. When on campaign, they would erect a command tally (jiefu) and raise six dao banners (liudaoqi). Their authority in external appointments was unparalleled. After the Zhide period, throughout the empire, the central plains regional governors likewise followed this precedent and received the title of jiedushi. [21]

"The dao banners, six in number, were erected at the central camp and led the formation. Two red military gate flags, each with eight panels, were placed at the front line. Two gate spears, with blades made of leopard tails, were positioned behind the red flags, stationed at the left and right of the camp gate. Five-direction flags, five in number, were also erected at the central camp, following behind the six dao banners; within the camp, they were positioned behind the dao banners, arranged according to their respective directions. Twelve strict warning drums were placed on the left and right sides in front of the camp, six on each side, marching behind the six dao banners." [22]

"It is said that for all military banners, they are raised in high and open places on plains and fields for long-distance visibility. The general takes position atop, facing south, with twelve drums placed on each side and twelve horns at the corners. On the left and right, five-colored flags are erected. The six dao banners (liudaoqi) stand in front, followed by rows of other flags. The left and right deputy officers station their troops in a crescent formation behind as the rear cavalry, overseeing the plain below. This arrangement allows soldiers to see the banners and hear the drums and horns clearly, maintaining awareness of commands." [23]

From the above historical materials, five key points about the dao banners (liudaoqi) can be discerned. First, the six dao banners were originally used in rites and music. Second, the use of dao banners by military governors (jiedushi) began at different recorded times: the Tongdian states after the second year of Jingyun, while the Old Book of Tang records it as during the Tianbao period. Third, the historical records note that "no external appointment is more honorable," indicating that possession of the six dao banners was a great honor for the jiedushi. Fourth, the six dao banners took precedence over other flags; when camps were established, the six dao banners marked the central camp, and during military operations, they served as

leading flags to guide the troops forward. Fifth, the six dao banners functioned as the command center; in wartime, they acted as the "general commander" over other signaling instruments such as drums, horns, and five-colored flags.

Combining the above discussion on the lines "At the first banquet, inspecting the military attire, arrayed shining across the broad courtyard. The courtyard empties as six horses enter, bay and sorrel raising banners," the author believes that the phrase "six horses enter" refers to six soldiers each mounted on horseback, holding one of the six dao banners (liudaoqi) as they enter the parade ground. The reasons are as follows:

First, the timing when a jiedushi could possess six dao banners (liudaoqi) coincides appropriately. As mentioned above, during the Jingyun or Tianbao eras, the emperor permitted jiedushi to bear six dao banners. "(In the spring of the second year of Guangde) on the day of guimao, the regions of Jian'nan East and Xichuan were merged into one circuit, appointing Huangmen Shilang Yan Wu as jiedushi." [24] Yan Wu assumed office as Jian'nan jiedushi in February; therefore, regardless of when jiedushi could hold six dao banners, it does not affect the inevitable fact that in June of Guangde's second year, Yan Wu's troops possessed six dao banners.

Second, the function of the six dao banners (liudaoqi) aligns with the poem's lines. Yan Wu's military review was a military event; as mentioned above, the six dao banners served as leading flags to guide the troops forward. In Yangqi, the first to appear are the "six horses" holding banners, which corresponds exactly with the role of the dao banners as leading standards.

Third, there should be no imaginary or metaphorical reference in the poem. In Yangqi, the lines "My lord meets guests, solemn with unusual sounds. At the first banquet, inspecting the military attire, arrayed shining across the broad courtyard. The courtyard empties as six horses enter, bay and sorrel raising banners" are all objective descriptions of the military review's environment and scene, arranged in a certain sequence. Unlike the later eight lines that depict the gestures of flag-waving, here there is no figurative or metaphorical imagery. If "six horses" were a metaphorical image, it would be excessively abrupt. Furthermore, in the poem, "six horses" is paired with "raising banners"; since "raising banners" is a literal description, "six horses" naturally must also be literal.

Moreover, the system of six dao banners (liudaoqi) first appeared in the early and mid-Tang period and is also reflected in mid-to-late Tang poetry. For example, Zhang Ji's General's March states: "At the eastern pass of Zhenzheng Gorge lies the dust of barbarians; the Son of Heaven selects the day to confer the generalship. Before the Penglai Palace, six dao banners are bestowed; the general then commands the imperial troops as his contingent." Bai Juyi's Seeing Off Lord Linghu to Taiyuan includes: "Six dao banners and twin standards, ten thousand armored soldiers; along the old Fen River road, all gleaming with radiance. When did the official in green robes depart? The general with red pennants returned yesterday." These examples confirm that six dao banners were commonly used in describing officials—especially military officers and jiedushi—and though Du Fu's poem uses the term "six horses," the intention is essentially the same.

As for Mr. Xie Siwei's interpretation of "five horses and one sorrel horse," although it is likewise a literal description, this view lacks a complete evidential chain. Combined with the critique by Mr. Xiao Difei mentioned above, the author considers this explanation somewhat tenuous and not a convincing literal interpretation.

4. Conclusion

Regarding the use of the term "six horses" in Yangqi, this paper holds that the metaphorical or symbolic interpretations—such as "the Son of Heaven driving six horses," "six horses feeding upwards," or "a nobleman riding six horses"—as well as literal interpretations like "five horses and one sorrel horse," cannot correspond adequately to the poem's meaning and historical context. Here, the term "six horses" should be understood as Du Fu's realistic depiction of six cavalrymen entering the parade ground, each holding one of the six dao banners (liudaoqi) during Yan Wu's military inspection.

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