

The Chinese Zodiac

THE RAT RACE

by Sarah Novak

A line of animals had gathered on the riverbank — a pig, a dog, a rooster, a monkey, a goat, a horse, a snake, a dragon, a rabbit, a tiger, an ox, and a rat. “How will we get across the river to the Jade Emperor?” they asked each other. “He invited us to race to his Heavenly Palace!” “How will I get to the other side first?” thought the crafty rat. The powerful ox, confident in his strength, plunged in and began to swim across. The others followed, except for the rat. He had already climbed up on the ox’s back

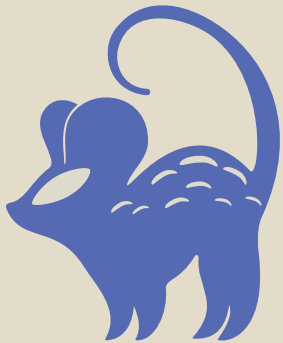
for a free ride. As soon as the ox arrived at the opposite bank, the rat leaped off and scampered to the Jade Emperor, first in line. The ox was second, followed by the other animals one by one, with the slow pig last. But where was the cat? He had missed the race entirely. He was still napping by the warm stove because the rat had forgotten to wake him as promised. Or did that rat really forget? That is why the cat and the rat are enemies, and why there are 12 animals in the Chinese zodiac, with the rat first and the pig last.



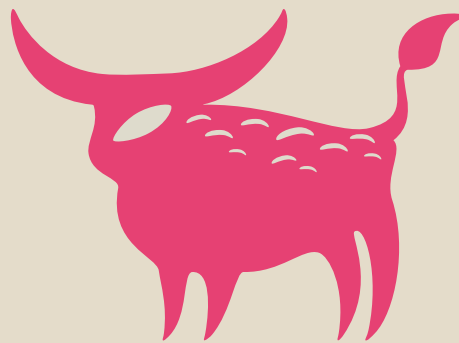
That paper placemat under your bowl of wonton soup at the Chinese restaurant probably has pictures of those 12 animals, along with some dates and descriptions. They are the *Zhongguo shuxiang*, or Chinese zodiac. Unlike the Western zodiac and its constellations, the Chinese zodiac is based on an ancient calendar. However, this calendar's cycle includes 12 years, not 12 months. Each year in a cycle is named for one of the zodiac animals, and the animal is said to "rule" that year. For example, the year 2016 is the Year of the Monkey, and 2017 is the Year of the Rooster.

Happy New Year, Chinese Style

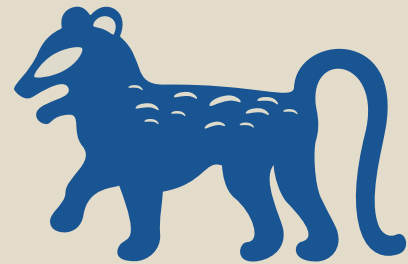
The traditional new year in China officially begins not on January 1, but on the first day of the Lunar New Year, a date that varies from year to year. A lunar year is measured by the recurring phases of the moon. According to Chinese reckoning, the new year begins at the second new moon after the winter solstice (the shortest day of the year). The exact day varies, but always falls between late January and the middle of February. This



Rat



Ox

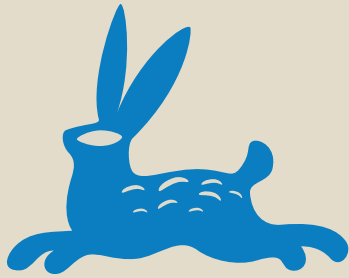


Tiger

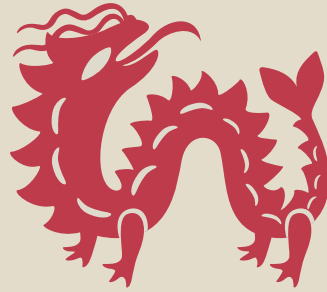
date marks the beginning of spring and is celebrated with parades, feasts, and fireworks as the most important holiday in China and for Chinese communities worldwide. Many people, however, when figuring out their Chinese zodiac animal sign simplify the process by using the corresponding Western year that begins in January.

Mysterious Origins

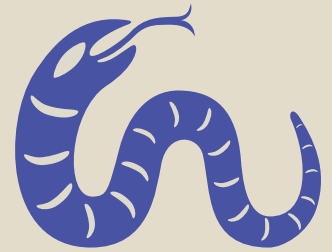
Other than the folktale version, no one knows exactly how the selection and order of the zodiac animals began. Some scholars think they may have originated with ancient Chinese clans that chose an animal they hunted, farmed with, or worshiped to identify



Rabbit



Dragon



Snake

their tribe. According to tradition, the legendary Yellow Emperor established a zodiac system, along with bestowing fire, medicine, weapons, and agriculture on his people. Adding up the years since his reign (said to be 2697–2597 B.C.) makes the Western year 2016 equivalent to Lunar Year 4714.

Tombs and Travelers

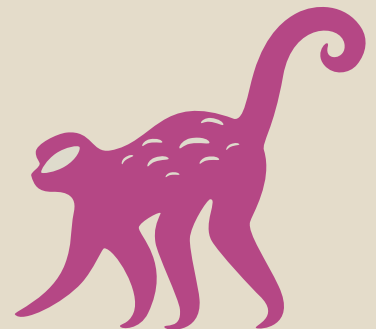
Tomb paintings dating from the 6th century B.C. depict the zodiac animals, and a pottery set fashioned in the shape of figures with animal heads and human bodies was discovered in a tomb dating to the Tang dynasty (A.D. 618–90). Some historians suggest that the concept of the animal zodiac was not originally Chinese but was brought by Buddhist monks and other travelers on the Silk Road, the ancient trading routes that connected China with India and the Mediterranean Sea.



Horse



Goat



Monkey

Year of Destiny

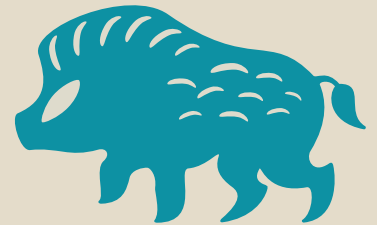
The Western calendar was established officially in China in 1912 at the end of the *Qing* dynasty. The old calendar was not abolished officially until 1949, with the creation of the People's Republic of China. Many Chinese people, however, still enjoy the traditions of their zodiac animal. Every recurring 12th year of a person's zodiac sign is considered a *benming* year, or "year of personal destiny." A 60th birthday — five sets of 12 years — completes the cycle, and is celebrated as a special occasion. In Chinese tradition, the Jade Emperor is the ruler of heaven. A lunar year is an interval of 12 lunar months. The average time between new or full moons — that is, a lunar month — equals 29 days, 12 hours, and 44 minutes. The Yellow Emperor was known as Huangdi. The Chinese honor him as a legendary ruler who brought culture and civilization. Dynasty refers to a family



Rooster



Dog



Pig

or group holding power for many years. Buddhists are followers of Buddha (563?–483? B.C.), the Indian founder of Buddhism, whose followers seek enlightenment, a blessed state in which a person rises above desire and suffering and attains Nirvana — an ideal condition of rest, harmony, stability, or joy. Oracle refers to a prediction or advice from a divine source. Solar year refers to the period of time it takes the earth to make one complete revolution around the sun — 365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes, and 45.51 seconds. Yin and yang are Chinese words for complementary but opposite forces that make up the life force.

Freelance writer and editor Sarah Novak specializes in history and travel. She particularly enjoys the people and culture of China, and her Chinese zodiac sign is the goat.