

Meet Your Chinese Zodiac Animal  
中国生肖文化解读系列

The  
YEAR  
of the  
OX  
生肖牛

Compiled by Zhang Lizhang (张立章)

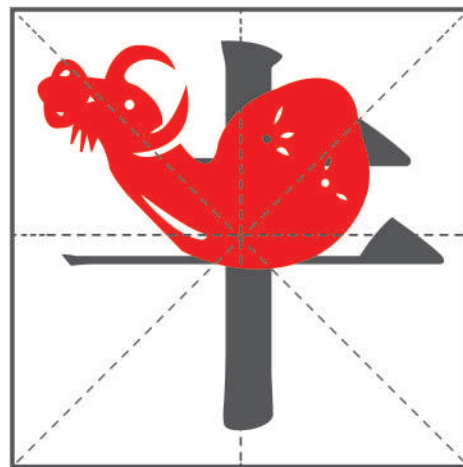
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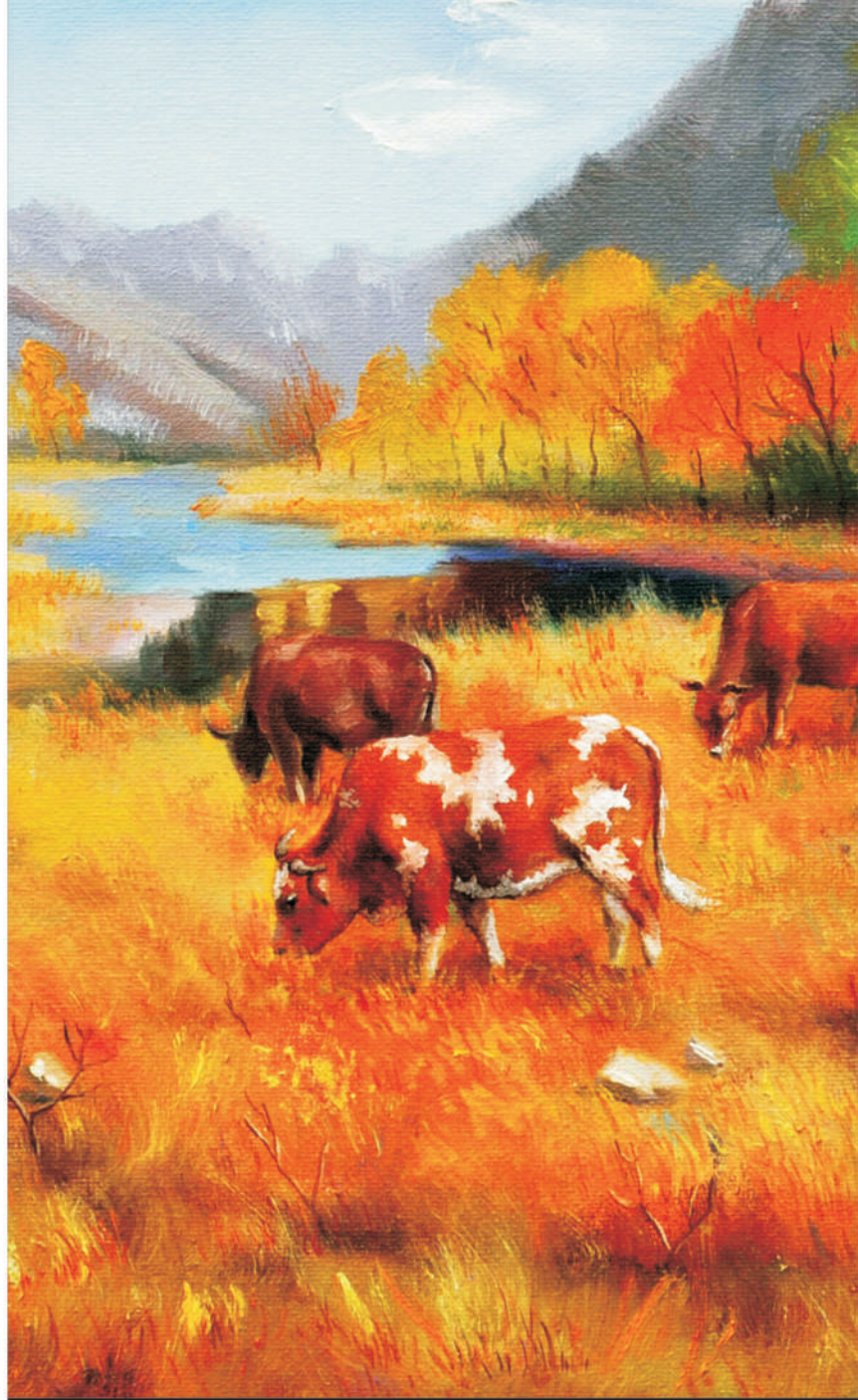
# Introduction



Dear friend, how much do you know about traditional Chinese culture?

Let's try a riddle to start: "There are 12 of them, each person claims but one of them; they can only be found in China. What are they?"

If you can figure it out, it shows that you know something about Chinese culture. In fact, former Japanese Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka put this riddle to Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai during his visit to China in September 1972 to enliven their meeting. The key to the riddle is "the 12-year cycle of animals in the Chinese zodiac", or simply "the 12 zodiac animals".





The riddle was a piece of cake for Premier Zhou, as the 12 zodiac animals are familiar to everyone in China. But what is the Chinese zodiac?

In Chinese, it is called 生肖 (shēngxiào). 生 means “be born”, while 肖 means “resemble”. In the eyes of the ancient Chinese, human beings are part of nature. People born in different lunar years correspond to specific animals. A person’s character resembles that of his or her animal. The 12 animals are the Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Goat,<sup>①</sup> Monkey, Rooster, Dog and Pig. People thus use them to number the years in a 12-year cycle. For example, if you were born in 1997, the Year of the Ox, the ox is your zodiac animal and is considered your lifelong mascot and guardian angel. Former Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai was born in 1898, the Year of the Dog. Kakuei Tanaka, former Japanese Prime Minister, was born in 1918, the Year of the Horse. They met with each other in 1972, the Year of the Rat.

The Chinese people mark the beginning of a year with the Spring Festival, which is the most important festival in the country. Each lunar year corresponds with one of the 12 zodiac animals, which will in turn become the auspicious

<sup>①</sup> The Chinese character 羊 (yáng) refers to both the goat and the sheep. Therefore, the eighth zodiac animal can be named goat or sheep. In this book, goat is used for the sake of convenience.

image of the festival. Many New Year pictures, couplets and greetings are also based on these zodiac animals.

“In the Year of the Rat, you will have good luck; in the Year of the Ox, you will grow stronger; in the Year of the Tiger, you will behave more bravely; in the Year of the Rabbit, you will become smarter; in the Year of the Dragon, you will have a promising career; in the Year of the Snake, you will be safe and sound; in the Year of the Horse, you will live a brilliant life; in the Year of the Goat, you will enjoy prosperity; in the Year of the Monkey, you will get a promotion; in the Year of the Rooster, you will win a prize; in the Year of the Dog, you will flourish; in the Year of the Pig, you will become more prominent.” This is a Chinese New Year greeting related to the 12 zodiac animals used to wish everyone the best every year.

In China, there is a tradition associated with the Spring Festival that has been handed down for over 1,000 years. When meeting with people during the festival, one should offer felicitations to others as often as possible. If instead you were to utter something ominous, it is said that this utterance will come true. In addition, Chinese people often use different felicitations in different years. If the year happens to be a year

people today no longer cling to the match of zodiac animals when they choose their boyfriends or girlfriends. At any rate, this remains an indispensable topic for chitchat among Chinese people.

## 🐂 Eminent Figures Born in the Year of the Ox

According to the Chinese zodiac, many outstanding historical figures were born in the Year of the Ox, for example:



### Gu Kaizhi

Born in 348, a celebrated painter during the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420).



### Liu Bei

Born in 161, the first ruler of the Kingdom of Shu during the period of the Three Kingdoms.



### Tao Yuanming

Born in 365, a well-known poet at the end of the Eastern Jin Dynasty and the foremost representative of fields and gardens poetry.<sup>①</sup>



### Sun Simiao

Born in 581, a pharmacologist of the Tang Dynasty and hailed as "China's King of Medicine".



### Li Bai

Born in 701, the greatest romantic poet in Chinese history and hailed as the "Immortal Poet".



### Fan Zhongyan

Born in 989, a prominent statesman, writer, military strategist and the author of the classic *Memorial for Yueyang Tower*.

① A type of poetry focused on describing the natural world, rural landscape and the tranquil life. It was a form typically used by poets who lived a reclusive life and those who strove to live a peaceful life.