

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

The
YEAR
of the
SNAKE
生肖蛇

Compiled by Zhang Lizhang (张立章)

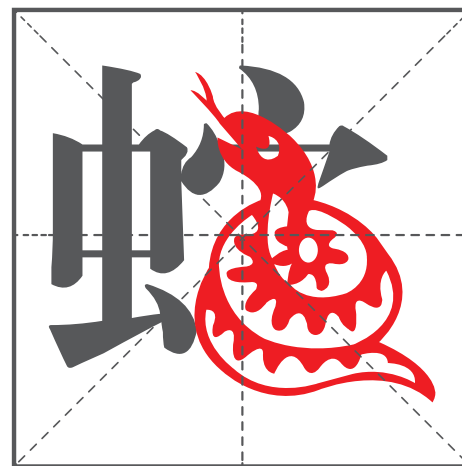
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Introduction



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?

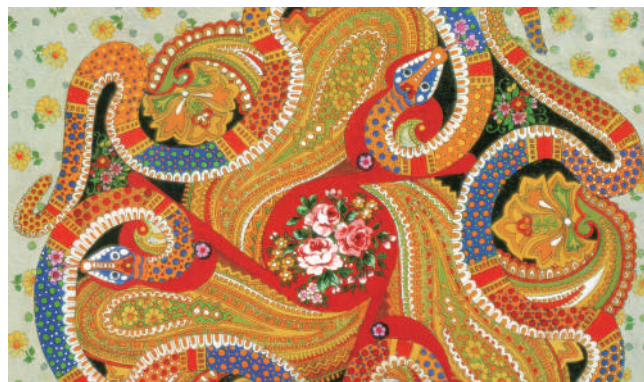
In Chinese, it is called 生肖 (shēngxiào). 生 means "be born", while 肖 means "resemble". In the eyes of the ancient Chinese, human beings are part of nature. People born in different lunar years correspond to specific animals. A person's character resembles that of his or her animal. The 12 animals are the Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Goat,^① 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 2001, the Year of the Snake according to the Chinese

① 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.

lunar calendar, you will have the snake as your zodiac animal, and the snake will also be your lifelong mascot and guardian angel.

The Chinese people often 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 image of the festival. Most New Year pictures, couplets, and greetings will feature the zodiac animal.

“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 a thousand 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 of a zodiac animal that has a noble status based on traditional Chinese culture, a good image, or a name that shares a similar pronunciation with words portending good fortune, Chinese people will use the zodiac animal name in their New Year greetings. These zodiac animals are the Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Horse, Goat,



Qu Yuan

Born in 340 BC, a patriotic poet and minister during the Warring States Period (475-221 BC).



Liu Bang

Born in 256 BC, Emperor Gaozu and founder of the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD).



Hua Tuo

Born in 145, the "miracle-working doctor" in the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220) and the world's first doctor to use anesthetic during surgery.



Zu Chongzhi

Born in 429, a mathematician and astronomer in the Southern and Northern Dynasties (420-589), and the world's first person to derive the approximations of π to the seventh decimal point.



Lu You

Born in 1125, a poet in the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279).



Xu Xiake

Born in 1587, a geographer and travel writer in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), and author of *The Travel Diaries of Xu Xiake*.



Lin Zexu

Born in 1785, an official in the late Qing Dynasty and national hero who was best known for burning opium at Humen, Guangdong Province.



Lu Xun

Born in 1881, a leading modern Chinese writer and thinker.

In other countries, there are also many eminent figures born in the Year of the Snake. Here are a few of them:



Nicolaus Copernicus

Born in 1473, Polish astronomer and founder of the heliocentric theory in the Renaissance.