

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

The
YEAR
of the
RAT
生肖鼠

Compiled by Zhang Lizhang (张立章)

Translated by Xue Yuwei (薛彧威) & Wu Aijun (吴爱俊)

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24 Baiwanzhuang Road, Beijing 100037, China
Tel: (86) 10-68320585 68997826
Fax: (86) 10-68997826 68326333
<http://www.sinolingua.com.cn>
E-mail: hyjx@sinolingua.com.cn
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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.

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.

For example, if you were born in 2008, the Year of the Rat, you will have the rat as your zodiac animal and the rat will be your lifelong mascot and guardian angel. Japanese Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka met Premier Zhou in 1972, which happens to be the Year of the Rat.

The Chinese people often mark the beginning of a year with the Spring Festival, which is the most important festival in the country. It 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 Chinese traditional 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,

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 Rat

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



Zhuangzi

Born in 369 BC, a philosopher and thinker during the Warring States Period (475-221 BC).



Du Fu

Born in 712, known as the poet-sage of the Tang Dynasty.



Li Qingzhao

Born in 1084, a famous poetess of the Song Dynasty (960-1279).



Zhu Di

Born in 1360, an emperor who seized power and established Beijing as the capital during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).



Kong Shangren

Born in 1648, the 64th-generation descendant of Confucius and a Ming Dynasty dramatist best known for his play *The Peach Blossom Fan*.



Qigong

Born in 1912, a contemporary calligrapher, painter and connoisseur of cultural relics.

In other countries, there are also many distinguished figures who were born in the Year of the Rat. Some of them are listed below. Look into whether or not they also share the hallmark characteristics of the “Rat” .



Ferdinand Magellan

Born in 1480, the famous Portuguese navigator who was the first explorer in history to accomplish a circumnavigation of the globe.