

A TASTE OF CHINA



# CHINESE ZODIAC STORIES

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藏书章

ZODIAC  
STORIES

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**A Taste of China**  
**Chinese Zodiac Stories**

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# Preface



There is a Chinese riddle that goes, “Each person has one, each family has several, and the whole world has only twelve.” Many people are confused by this riddle; the answer being the twelve animal signs of the zodiac. The Chinese ancients used twelve animals to represent a person’s birth year, and each person belongs to one of the animal signs or shengxiao “生肖”. These signs include the rat, the ox, the tiger, the rabbit, the dragon, the snake, the horse, the goat, the monkey, the rooster, the dog, and the pig. In Chinese, “生” means birth, and “肖” means resemblance. The meaning of each sign serves as an analogy for the person born to that sign. This method of dividing time into birth years is characteristic of the Chinese, and is comparable to Western astrology’s twelve signs of the zodiac. It demonstrates the aspirations of the Chinese ancients to become one with creation, pursuing the integration of man with the heavens and with the natural world.

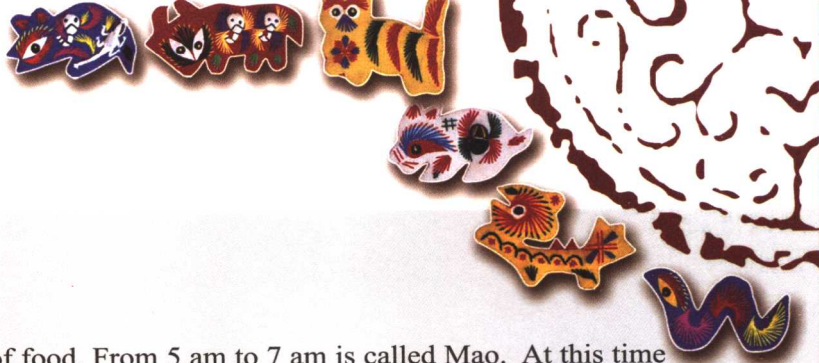
There is no consensus on the origins of the Chinese zodiac. One of the most popular legends holds that the Jade Emperor convened a race to decide the order of the animals in the zodiac. The pig, rat, ox, horse, goat, and all of the other animals assembled on one side of the Celestial Sea, and, each using its



unique skills, raced to the other side. The steadfast ox, originally occupying the first place position, was robbed of his right by the shrewd rat, who took advantage of an opportune moment to soundlessly leap onto the ox's back. Unnoticed, the rat sat on the ox's head, eventually winning the race by his cunning. That is why the year of the ox follows second after the year of the rat, the first year in the animal cycle.

There is another theory that holds much wider acceptance. This theory maintains that the selection and order of the twelve animal signs are determined by the time of day at which these animals are said to be the most active. Since the beginning of the Han Dynasty, the Chinese have used a system of time in which the day is divided into twelve two-hour periods, starting with 11 pm. The two-hour period between 11 pm and 1 am is called Zi. It is during these hours that the rat is thought to be the most active. It is said that this is the time when the rat bites a crack out of the chaos between heaven and earth. The second period, between 1 am and 3 am, is called Chou. This is the time when the ox chews its cud and prepares to plow the fields. The period between 3 am and 5 am is called Yin, and is the time during which the tiger is most ferocious, prowling far and wide





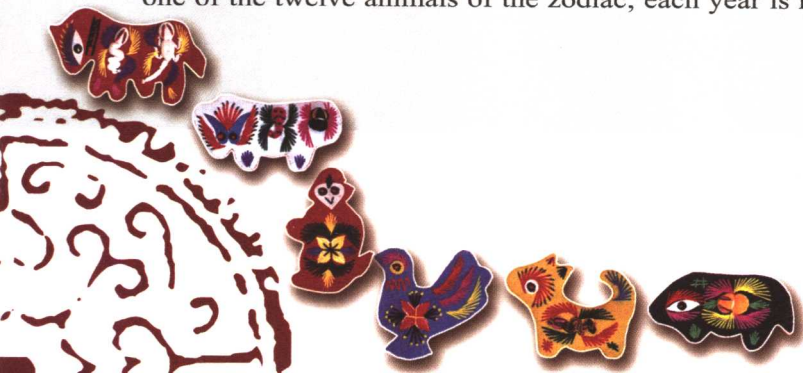
in search of food. From 5 am to 7 am is called Mao. At this time the sun has yet to rise, the moon is still suspended in the sky, and the legendary Jade Rabbit is busy working in the moonlight. The following period is called Chen. This period runs between 7 am and 9 am, the best time for the magic dragon to generate rain. From 9 am to 11 am is called Si, when the spring grass flourishes, and the snake is most lively. The seventh period, called Wu, is between 11 am and 1 pm. It is then that the sun is at its most brilliant, and the horse travels best. The period between 1 pm and 3 pm is called Wei. It is said that if a goat eats a patch of grass during this time, it will grow more luxuriously. From 3 pm to 5 pm is called Shen, when the monkeys are noisy and jubilant, and can be seen joyfully playing and jumping. From 5 pm to 7 pm is called You, when darkness gathers and the rooster returns home. From 7 pm to 9 pm is the period of Xu, during which the dog keeps watch at night. From 9 pm to 11 pm is called Hai. This is the time when darkness covers the whole of creation and all is quiet apart from the pig's snores.

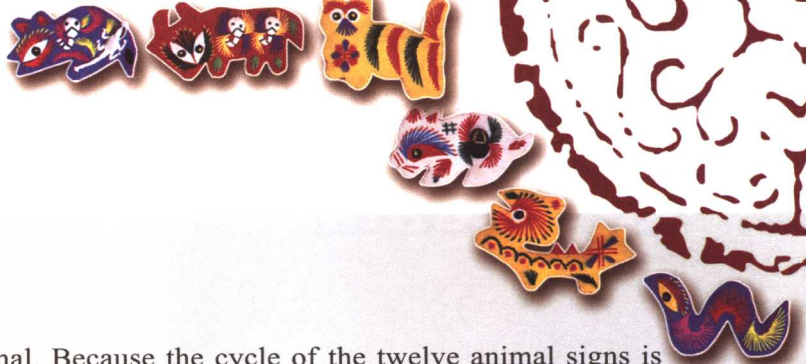
Despite the fact that the origins of the Chinese zodiac are uncertain, its ideas continue to be handed down to this day. This is due to their convenience, accessibility to the general

public, and their value of interest. Not only Han people, but people of all areas permeated by Han culture, such as East Asia and Southeast Asia, take on the animal signs of their birth. These ideas have had a profound impact on the heart of every person of Chinese origin.

6 **W**hen exchanging New Year's gifts, the Chinese like to choose gifts carrying designs with the animal of that year. Painters and calligraphers often inscribe their works with words reading, "completed in the year of the ox" or "completed in the year of the tiger". When choosing sons-in-law and daughters-in-law, superstitious families make sure that their prospective new family members have no inauspicious incompatibilities with their own. It is widely agreed that people of different animal signs differ from each other in character and personality. Moreover, many believe that those who share a common animal sign vary in temperament and destiny depending on the month and hour of their birth.

**T**he most important concept in the Chinese zodiac is that of the birth year. The Han people associate their birth year with one of the twelve animals of the zodiac; each year is represented





by an animal. Because the cycle of the twelve animal signs is continuous, people meet up with their birth year every twelve years. Birth years are encountered at the ages of 12, 24, 36, 48, 60, 72, and so on. Because folk people believe that birth years are ominous, they try to avoid disaster by all means possible. In northern China, as a means of dispelling evil during their birth years, people wear red waist belts and children wear red underwear. These customs persist to this day. Every Chinese New Year, markets everywhere sell red belts and red knots. Those with birth years during the New Year wear these articles around their waists or wrists to turn potential misfortune into good fortune. Not only the Han people, but people from many Chinese ethnic groups, attach great importance to the sixtieth birthday, or Huajia. Because it is the sixth birth year in one's life, and because it completes a full cycle of a Chinese lunar calendar, one's Huajia is deserving of a grand celebration. It is a time for people to express their wishes for longevity, health, and good fortune.

**W**ith a myriad of diverse stories and folk customs, the zodiac culture has become an integral part in the life of Chinese people. It can be said that without an understanding of the zodiac culture, one's knowledge of China is incomplete.

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# The Rat Bites Open the Sky



## Rat

According to the ancient Chinese classic, Explaining Simple and Analyzing Compound Characters, “鼠” is a hieroglyph in the image of a rat. The upper part of the character depicts the rat’s teeth; the lower part resembles the belly, the claws, and the tail of the rat. There are more than 100 Chinese characters that contain “鼠” as a component. These characters are used to differentiate between different members of the rodent family.



Even though public praise of the rat is not forthcoming, and most people find its appearance less than agreeable – a fact shown by the phrase, “when a rat crosses the street, everyone shouts to beat it” – the point of view as seen from folklore and cultural studies is much more favorable. The rat from this view is seen as a creature that has adapted by virtue of its incomparable intelligence and sagacity.

There are many Chinese turns of phrase which put the rat in a favorable light. “The rat jumps onto a lamp stand” has an implied meaning of bringing brightness to every household. “The rat bites open the sky” implies a universal celebration, in which the whole world is joined in

jubilant. “The rat gets married” demonstrates a wish for prosperity and a good life.

Of these, the phrase, “the rat bites open the sky” enjoys a special popularity. It is said that in the beginning of time the universe was a vast expanse of obscurity, in which people had difficulty differentiating between north and south, east and west; between summer and winter, and day and night. It was difficult for creation

to grow and flourish. It was then, at around 11 pm, that the rat began to bite without ceasing until the break of day. The earth was thus divided into Yin and Yang, and creation encountered the first of the sun’s rays, which sent it into jubilation. This is why the rat is the first among the animals of the zodiac. People see the rat as the embodiment of all aspirations for





## The Rat Bites Open the Sky

light and brightness, and as a representation of love for the sun.

Another popular phrase with reference to the rat is, “the rat bestows grain.” Legend has it that when the Jade Emperor saw mortals living lives of affluence, without strain or effort, he ordered that all the seed for grains be taken back to heaven’s Celestial Court for fear that mortals would acquire habits of idleness and laziness. The heavenly god loaded the grain into a large bag and mounted the clouds to speed across the sky. How could he know that hidden in the bag was a rat? The rat hurriedly bit the bag apart to flee for his life, scattering the grain on the ground.

This is how the grains of the earth avoided extinction. This legend

is particularly prevalent in Zhejiang Province, where people, out of special reverence for grain, worship and offer sacrifices to the rat, which is seen as the “god of grain”.



In the past, some areas in China held a festival in honor of the rat marrying off its daughter. On the night of the twenty-fifth day of the first month of the lunar calendar, every household refrained from



lighting their lamps. Families ate wheat flour pastries called rat paws in silence and darkness, so as not to bother the rat. It was said that being an inconvenience to the rat could lead to disaster in the coming year. This event is often depicted in paper-cutting and other forms of folk art. Around the time of the Chinese New Year, paintings devoted to the subject of marriage in the rat family are numerous. These paintings all imply that from the moment the rat bride is married, households are in a position to avoid disaster. The fact that the rat's daughter gets married entails the future birth of children. It is for this reason that the rat is seen as the god of children, implying that he is responsible for bringing families prosperity and multiple offspring.

It is said that people born in the year of the rat are always on the go. They place a great deal of importance on emotions and feelings, and they have great aspirations. They are said to be energetic, excellent



## The Rat Bites Open the Sky

managers of finance, a bit severe, sociable, humorous, intelligent, popular, attractive, and lively. It is believed that they have strong emotions and possess an ability to capably handle multiple tasks.



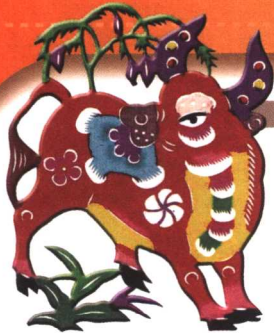
## The Ox Plows Years of Bumper Harvests

牛 Ox

"牛" is a hieroglyph that resembles an ox head. In the inscriptions on bones and tortoise shells of the Shang Dynasty, this character is a simplification of the shape of an ox head with a distinct pair of horns. Chinese people use "牛" as a typical representative of the natural world. Both "物," which means materials, and "件," which is a measurement of materials, contain the component "牛".



Of all the twelve zodiac animals, the ox is one of the most common but magnificent images: strong, simple and unadorned. The ox is diligent in plowing the soil and driving carts; and is thus considered to be the farmer's most powerful helper. Instead of pluming itself on its own contribution and accomplishment, it simply continues to devote itself to silently working to the best of its abilities. Since ancient times, China has been a country dependant on agriculture; and the ox, with its hardworking character and its ability to endure hardship, is considered the best household assistant in vast rural areas. People often praise the ox because it "takes in grass and gives out milk".



A folk proverb says, “The years of the ox and the horse are favorable for farming.” According to this proverb, whenever a Year of the Ox or Year of the Horse comes around, farmers can expect good weather for their crops. This belief most likely stems from the fact that both the ox and the horse are used for farming, so the hardworking farmers feel that they must get some benefit in the years of these animals.

People’s respect for the ox is also demonstrated in various traditional events and religious rituals. One of the most typical examples is the “lashing of the spring ox for an auspicious sign”, an event which occurs prior to the spring plowing. The day marking the beginning of spring, when activities to welcome spring reach a culminating point, is the day on which the “spring ox” is worshipped as a god. In addition to offering sacrifices, people carry a paper or clay ox on a gala parade, which also involves singing, yangee (a popular rural folk dance), and other recreational activities. All of this is termed “performing the spring”.

