



## The Race to the Finish

There are many varieties of this story. Some say that the Jade Emperor called a race of animals on his birthday to create the Chinese zodiac. Others say that it was in fact, the Buddha who did. Nevertheless, both stories are essentially the same, excluding some minor details.

According to myths, the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac were selected through a race. This race is meant to create a time measurement for the people. There could only be twelve winners and in order to win, the animals had to cross a rapid current river and reach the finish line on the shore.

Originally, there was a cat and a rat, who hated each other with a passion. It's hard to believe that they were once friends. These two were the worst swimmers in the animal kingdom, but they were both smart. They discovered that the fastest way to the river is to hop on top of the ox. The generous ox agreed to carry them across the river. However, the rat was so eager to win that he pushed the cat into the water; thus the cat never forgave the rat, and wasn't included in the race. Other variations of the story say that the rat just never told the cat about the race and did not even compete at all.

Afterwards the ox and the rat made it to shore. The rat jumped in front of the ox and came first in the race. The ox came in second and the tiger finished in third.

All of a sudden, a loud thumping sound came: it was the rabbit. It jumped from one stone to another and was doing well until it slipped. Fortunately, there was a log floating by and it grabbed onto that log and floated to the finish line earning the fourth place in the race. In fifth place was the dragon, but everyone thought that it would come in first because it could fly. It told Jade Emperor that it had to stop a couple of times to help some villagers. And on



its way to the finish line, it saw a little rabbit on a log and decided to give a little puff of air to help it get to shore. After the dragon, the horse came galloping towards the finish line. The sneaky snake was hidden behind the horse's foot. It suddenly appeared and the horse was scared. The snake took advantage of this and landed itself in sixth place, and the horse landed in seventh.

Soon after, the monkey, the rooster, and the sheep landed onto shore. Unlike some of the previous animals, these three actually helped each other to get to the finish line. The rooster found a raft, and the monkey and sheep hopped on. Working hard together through the water currents and the weeds, they reached shore: the sheep came in eighth place, the monkey in ninth place, and the rooster in tenth place. In eleventh place was the dog. Even though it was a great swimmer, it was late. It told the emperor that it needed a bath, and the fresh water from the river was too tempting. Right when the emperor was going to close the race, an "oink" sound was heard: it was the pig. "Lazy little pig" originated from this story. The pig felt hungry in the middle of the race, so it stopped, ate something, and then fell asleep. After it awoke, it finished the race in twelfth place and became the last animal to arrive.

The order of the lunar calendar follows the outcome of the race, where the rat is the first animal to start the sequence, and the pig is the last. After the pig, the sequence starts over again. The lunar calendar has been a significant calendar for China and the Chinese zodiac. Many parts of the world are also familiar with this calendar.

—<https://depts.washington.edu/triolive/quest/2007/TTQ07030/mythology.html>

## The surprising influence of the Chinese zodiac

Sep 20, 2016 Julia Fawal

Whether or not you believe in it, the zodiac system is a useful way to understand Chinese culture, says writer ShaoLan Hsueh.

Do you know your Chinese zodiac sign? According to tradition, it reveals more than simply your age — it's a window into your personality, career, love prospects, and future good (or bad) fortune. For ShaoLan Hsueh (TED Talk: The Chinese zodiac, explained), the zodiac isn't scientific truth, but teaching it is a fun way to achieve her real goal: to help the Western world develop a deeper understanding of Chinese culture. (She's also created Chineasy, a visual learning system for Chinese.) Here, she dives into the history and modern relevance of the zodiac with lively drawings of each sign and its name in Pinyin — that is, the English pronunciation of Chinese characters.

The Chinese zodiac follows the moon (rather than constellations, as in the Greco-Roman zodiac system). It is divided into a 12-year cycle, with a different animal representing each year. “Every child in China, Taiwan and Singapore knows the story of the Chinese zodiac. It's something they learn from birth,” says ShaoLan. Philosophy is deeply rooted in Chinese culture, and the zodiac,

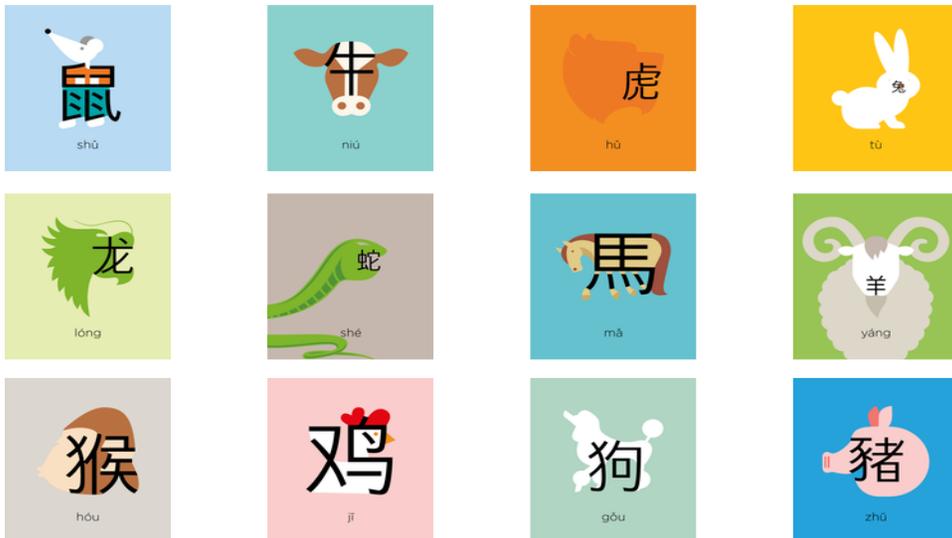
combined with the principles of yin and yang and the five elements, asserts a remarkable influence over people's decisions and beliefs.

“If you ask people in China if they believe in the zodiac, many will initially say, ‘no, no. We are modern.’ But if you ask them when they want to have children, they'll say, ‘hey, it's not a bad idea to have a Dragon baby,’” says ShaoLan. Alibaba's Jack Ma, she notes, is just such a Dragon baby. But as she says in her talk, “I went through the Forbes top 300 richest people in the world, and it's interesting to see the most undesirable two animals, the Goat and Tiger, are at the top of the chart, even higher than the Dragon.”

Sometimes, zodiac signs become a quick shorthand. Once you reveal your zodiac sign, the person you're talking to might start forming opinions on your personality. They're also likely to start calculating your age. “At university, instead of saying, ‘I'm a freshman,’ it's very common to say, ‘I'm a pig,’ or ‘I'm a horse,’” says ShaoLan. “Immediately we know the social pecking order in the group.”

As ShaoLan notes in her talk, “the Chinese believe certain animals get on better than the others. So parents choose specific years to give birth to babies, because they believe the team effort by the right combination of animals can give prosperity to families.” These individual family-by-family decisions, she says, “might seem small-scale, but it causes an actual fluctuation in consumer demand and impacts the economy.”

“Even if you don't believe in it, the zodiac is a fun way to learn more about Chinese culture,” says ShaoLan. “It's a reminder of how important it is to pay attention to different societies and keep an open mind about our many differences and similarities.”



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