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

The  
YEAR  
of the  
SNAKE

生肖蛇

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First Edition 2019



ISBN 978-7-5138-1644-1

Copyright 2019 by Sino Lingua Co., Ltd

Published by Sino Lingua Co., Ltd

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Printed by Beijing Xicheng Printing Co., Ltd

Printed in the People's Republic of China



<https://www.purpleculture.net>

# Introduction



**D**ear 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 十二生肖 (shíèrxiāndòng). 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 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,

Monkey, and Rooster. As for the other zodiac animals, which are the Rat, Snake, Dog and Pig, they do not appear in New Year greetings. So when the Spring Festival of the Year of the Snake comes, how do Chinese people offer their greetings? Actually, they replace 蛇年 (the Year of the Snake) with 新年 (New Year) or 新春 (New Year-Spring Festival) in their greetings.

1. Happy New Year! May all go well with you!

(祝您) 新年快乐, 万事如意!

(Zhù nín xīnnián kuàilè wànshì rúyì!

2. I wish you good health and great fortune all year round!

祝您在新的一年里身体健康, 四季发财!

(Zhù nín zài xīn de yī nián lì shēntǐ jiànkāng, sìjì fācài!

3. I wish you happiness and great fortune in the New Year!

恭贺新禧, 恭喜发财! Gōnghè xīnxǐ, gōngxǐ-fācài!

4. Good luck in the New Year!

祝您新年好运亨通! Zhù nín xīnnián hǎoyùn hēngtōng!

## 引言

朋友, 你对中国传统文化是否了解?

请你先猜个谜语。谜面是: “共有十二个, 每人占一个, 东洋西洋都没有, 请问是什么?”

如果你猜出了正确答案, 说明你对中国文化有一定了解。这个谜语是 1972 年 9 月, 日本前首相田中角荣先生访华时, 为活跃气氛, 给时任中国总理的周恩来先生猜的一个谜语, 谜底就是“十二生肖”。

这个谜语当然没能难住周恩来总理, 因为每个中国人都熟知十二生肖。那么, 什么是中国人的“生肖”呢?

“生肖”的“生”就是“出生”的意思, “肖”是“相似”的意思。也就是说, 在古代中国人的观念里, 人是自然界的普通一员, 不同时间出生的人, 就会与某一种动物相对应, 其性格也会与该动物的特征相似。这些动物分别是鼠、牛、虎、兔、龙、蛇、马、羊、猴、鸡、狗、猪, 共 12 种。人们就用这 12 种动物来纪年, 12 年一个循环, 周而复始。假如你出生在公元 2001 年, 这一年在中国历法中正是蛇年, 那么

你的属相就是蛇，蛇就是你一生的吉祥物和保护神。

中国人以自己的传统节日——春节为一年之始，而每一年的春节都以当年对应的生肖动物为节日图腾。春节张贴的年画、春联和新年祝福语都会以此为主题。

“鼠年进宝，牛年身壮，虎年孺猛，兔年机巧，龙年飞腾，蛇年安康，马年奔跃，羊年开泰，猴年高升，鸡年中英，狗年兴旺，猪年响当当！”这就是一句以12生肖为主题的新年祝福语，寓意是“年年你都会有好运气”。

中国人有一个流传千百年的文化传统，就是在春节前后，见人要多说吉利话。传说如果在这个佳节期间说不吉利的话会应验成真。但是，不同生肖年度的春节，中国人常用的吉利话也有所不同：在中国文化传统中地牲高、形象好或者谐音吉利的生肖动物就会直接出现在吉祥话中，比如牛、虎、兔、龙、马、羊、猴、鸡；另外一些生肖动物并不适宜出现在吉利话中的，如鼠、蛇、狗、猪等。那么，在蛇年春节，中国人会怎么说这些吉利话呢？一般会用“新年、新春”代替“蛇年”。

1. (祝您)新年快乐,万事如意!
2. 祝您在新的一年里身体健康,四季发财!
3. 恭贺新禧,恭喜发财!
4. 祝您新年好运亨通!



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## Chapter One

Zodiac Culture in  
Everyday Chinese  
Life

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The long-cherished Chinese zodiac tradition has been passed down from generation to generation and has become deep-rooted in people's minds. It is widely recognized among the Chinese people that the 12 zodiac animal signs are closely linked with people's personalities, destinies, lives and careers. Just as British people might talk about the weather when they first meet, Chinese people often ask what zodiac animal a person is when they meet for the first time. This can be explained for the following reasons:

First, it is a good way to deduce the age of a person. Since it's not very polite to ask another person's age directly, their zodiac animal coupled with their appearance can help one deduce a person's age.

Second, it serves as an ice-breaker and makes people feel at ease. Asking about zodiac animals is considered a common



communication skill by Chinese people. When two people find they share the same zodiac animal, they will have a natural affinity and be eager to talk with each other.

Chinese people tend to group themselves according to their zodiac animal signs out of the belief that those with the same sign possess similar personalities and characteristics. Hence, they like discussing in which zodiac animal year a prominent figure was born in their spare time. They even consider it a great honor if they find that they happen to share the same zodiac sign

with a renowned historical figure or contemporary celebrity, such as Genghis Khan (born in the Year of the Horse), founder of the Mongol Empire; Zhuge Liang (born in the Year of the Rooster), a statesman during the period of the Three Kingdoms (220-280) and a paradigm of wisdom and good virtue; Li Shimin (born in the Year of the Goat), the co-founder of the Tang Dynasty (618-907), a golden age in Chinese history; Deng Xiaoping (born in the Year of the Dragon), the late Chinese leader regarded as the chief architect of China's reform and opening-up; and Xi Jinping (born in the Year of the Snake), the current Chinese President.

Third, it can help people extrapolate other people's personalities. According to zodiac animal culture, people born in the same zodiac animal year often share similar personality traits, luck for wealth, professional achievements and marriage patterns. Some Chinese people even get to know and choose their spouses, co-workers or business partners by talking about their zodiac animals. This topic seems simple, but it has rich connotations to the Chinese people.

## ☯ Characteristics of "Snakes"

If you are born in the Year of the Snake, please read the



十二生肖

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following introduction and see if it is true for you.

The Chinese believe that people born in the Year of the Snake share the qualities of their zodiac animal. Generally speaking, they are sophisticated, composed, insightful and forward-looking. They are intelligent, eloquent and creative; they are also good at socializing, planning, thinking, and keep a low profile.

Just as every coin has two sides, people born in the Year of the Snake also have character flaws; for example, they have a strong desire for money and are skeptical about almost everything.

### ☉ Marriages for “Snakes”

Matchmaking related to the Chinese zodiac is as unique as it is intriguing. If a couple's zodiac signs are said to match well, they are expected to have a loving and successful marriage. On the other hand, if a couple's zodiac signs do not match well, their marriage is expected to be less than satisfactory. A man born in the Year of the Snake should seek a woman born in the year of the ox, the rabbit, or the rooster; while a woman born in the Year of the Snake should seek a man born in the year of the



monkey, the rooster, or the dog.

This notion has exerted great influence on people's attitudes towards marriage for nearly two thousand years. During the Qing Dynasty (1616-1911) and dynasties before that, marriages were arranged by parents, while young people had no freedom to choose their spouses. People often considered the match of zodiac animals as one of the important factors in determining a marriage. This resulted in a great number of tragic marriages during the long period of feudalism in China. However, young 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 Snake

According to the Chinese zodiac, many outstanding figures in Chinese history were born in the Year of Snake. Here are a few of them:



十二生肖





### 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  $\pi$  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.



### Montesquieu

Born in 1689, French thinker, jurist, and historian in the Enlightenment Age.



### Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Born in 1749, German writer and poet.



### Franz Schubert

Born in 1797, Austrian composer in the early 19th century.



### Charles Robert Darwin

Born in 1809, English naturalist, founder of the science of evolution, and author of *On the Origin of Species*.



### Abraham Lincoln

Born in 1809, 16th American President who abolished slavery in the United States.



### Alfred Bernhard Nobel

Born in 1833, Swedish chemist, engineer, entrepreneur, and founder of the Nobel Prize.



### Mahatma Gandhi

Born in 1869 as Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, leader of the Indian independence movement and initiator of nonviolent civil disobedience.



### Pablo Ruiz Picasso

Born in 1881, Spanish painter and one of the most creative and influential artists of the 20th century.



### Audrey Hepburn

Born in 1929, British actress with multiple Academy Award nominations, winner of an Academy Award for Best Actress for *Roman Holiday*.

## 第一章 中国人生活中的生肖文化

生肖文化在中国历史悠久，世代相传，家喻户晓，早已深深根植于中国人的血液之中。它与每个中国人的性格、命运、生活和事业紧密联系在一起，并得到了中国人的普遍认同。直到今天，人们初次见面时，问询对方的生肖也是常事，如同英国人见面时谈论天气一样普遍。这主要有以下几方面的原因：

一是通过询问生肖来推测对方的实际年龄。因为直接问询对方的年龄不太礼貌，所以可以通过间接询问对方的生肖后，再根据外貌特征显示的年龄范围来确定对方的实际年龄。

二是谈论生肖可迅速打破尴尬，拉近双方的心理距离。这也是中国人常见的一种见面沟通技巧，尤其是当生肖相同时，两人就有了天然的亲近感，话题自然打开。

在工作、生活中，中国人会不自觉地按照同一个生肖划分出小群体，以显得亲近。闲暇时人们也喜欢聊聊中国某一名人的生肖，还会以与历史伟人或当代名人的生肖相同而沾沾自喜。比如：蒙古帝国的缔造者成吉思汗属马；被中国人公认为智慧与





品德典范的三国时期政治家诸葛亮属鸡；中国古代“大唐盛世”的开创者李世民属羊；被誉为当代“中国社会主义现代化建设和改革开放总设计师”的前国家领导人邓小平属虎；现任的中国国家领导人习近平属蛇；等等。

三是根据生肖来推测对方的性格类型及特点。中国人认为，相同生肖的人往往具有相似的性格、财运、事业成就和婚姻状况等。一些中国人就是从谈论生肖的过程中了解、选择自己的婚恋对象、同事搭档和创业伙伴的。这个看似简单的生肖话题，却被中国人赋予了如此丰富多样的内涵。

### 一、属蛇人的运气和性格特点

假如你是属蛇的，你可以对照一下下面的特点，看看哪些特点与你相契合。

中国人认为，蛇年出生的人与蛇的某些特性相似。属蛇人一般处世老练，冷静沉着，对事物有较强的洞察力和预见性，且天资较为聪颖，善于聆听，有较好的社交能力；属蛇人总体而言思想深刻，创造性强，行事低调，计划性强。

凡事均有两面性，属蛇的人性格优点很多，也有一些缺点，如对金钱有极强的占有欲望，常以怀疑的眼光审视周围的事物等。

### 二、属蛇人的姻缘

在恋爱、婚姻观念方面，中国的生肖匹配观念十分奇特：如果生肖匹配，夫妻二人就会感情深厚，婚姻幸福；否则，就有可能不如人意。比如：属蛇的男人适宜早求生肖为牛、兔、和鸡的女人作为结婚对象；属蛇的女人，则适宜嫁给生肖为猴、鸡和狗的男人作为妻。

这种传统的婚姻选择观念已经影响了中国人近两千年。在以前的封建王朝时代，婚姻双方当事人没有自由选择的权利，父母是儿女婚姻的绝对决定者，而男女双方的生肖是否匹配是能否结婚的重要依据之一。没有人知道，在中国漫长的封建时代里，非自由选择的婚姻模式到底酿成了多少婚姻悲剧！当然，这些早已成为了历史，今天的年轻人不再执着于生肖相配的恋爱观，可生肖是否匹配仍是中国茶余饭后津津乐道的谈资。



### 三、属蛇的中外名人

按照中国人的生肖算法，中国历史上蛇年出生的杰出人物非常多。例如：

战国时期的爱国主义诗人——屈原（公元前340年出生）；

汉王朝建立者汉高祖——刘邦（公元前256年出生）；

世界上最早实施麻醉术的医生，被中国人誉为

“神医”的东汉医学家——华佗（145年出生）；

世界上第一个把圆周率推算到小数点后第七位的人，中国南北朝时期著名数学家、天文学家——祖冲之（429年出生）；

南宋时期著名爱国诗人——陆游（1125年出生）；

明代著名地理学家和旅行家，《徐霞客游记》的作者——徐霞客（1587年出生）；

清代末期的民族英雄，广东“虎门销烟”的领导者——林则徐（1785年出生）；

中国近代著名文学家、思想家——鲁迅（1881年出生）；

中国以外，蛇年出生的各国各界杰出人物也很多。比如：

文艺复兴时期波兰天文学家，“日心说”创立者——哥白尼（1473年出生）；

法国18世纪启蒙思想家、法学家、唯物主义史学家——孟德斯鸠（1689年出生）；

德国18世纪伟大诗人、作家——约翰·沃尔夫冈·冯·歌德（1749年出生）；

19世纪初期奥地利作曲家——弗朗茨·泽拉菲库斯·彼得·舒伯特（1797年出生）；

英国伟大的博物学家、进化论奠基人、《物种起源》作者——查尔斯·罗伯特·达尔文（1809年出生）；

废除奴隶制度、为民主制度献身的美国第16届总统——亚伯拉罕·林肯（1809年出生）；

瑞典著名化学家、工程师、实业家、诺贝尔奖创立者——阿尔弗雷德·伯纳德·诺贝尔（1833年出生）；

印度民族解放运动领袖、非暴力主义倡导者、被印度人民尊称为“圣雄”的莫罕达斯·卡拉姆昌德·甘地（1869年出生）；

20世纪最有创造性和影响深远的西班牙艺术大师——巴勃罗·鲁伊斯·毕加索（1881年出生）；

英国著名电影和舞台剧女演员，多次获得奥斯卡奖提名，主演《罗马假日》摘得奥斯卡最佳女主角奖的奥黛丽·赫本（1929年出生）。



## Chapter Two

The Origin and  
Cultural Significance  
of the Chinese  
Zodiac Animals

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