

Lunar Year of the Rat

Whenever the Lunar Year of the Rat approaches, the year's Chinese zodiac sign itself will naturally become a widely discussed topic, prompting the curious to mostly wonder: Why was the deplorable creature included in the Chinese zodiac and even ranked as the head of the 12 Chinese zodiac animals? Although there have been all kinds of folk tales surrounding its origin, most of them are at best sheer nonsense. To help clarify some misconceptions, here is a brief attempt to share some insight from the perspective of traditional Chinese culture.

The first likely explanation is the influence of the "thought of change." A sage of ancient times once said: "When it is exhausted, it mutates; by mutation it achieves continuity; by continuity it endures long." ("Xi Ci," *Zhouyi*). In other words, things will change when they reach the limit of their current state, subsequently leading to development that enables innovation and lasting effect. As attested by the old sayings, such as "No states and communities remain unchanged; no emperors and officials reign forever" ("32nd Year of Zhaogong," *Zuo Zhuan*) and "High banks become valleys and deep valleys become hills" ("Shi Yue Zhi Jiao of Xiao Ya," *Shijing*), there is nothing eternal in the world in both social and natural phenomena, let alone a rat. Conditioned by psychological habits, people tend to hope that bad things can be turned into good ones while good things can get even better. Therefore, in the imagination and aspiration of the ancients, the rat unexpectedly became a symbol of being sharp-witted, thriving at adversity, having abundant offspring, and achieving prosperity. In fact, the oriental version of the clever, witty, lively, and lovely Mickey Mouse can be traced back to the folk arts of the Chinese zodiac 2000 years ago when it first existed.

The second likely explanation is the influence of the "spirit of parity." Ancient Chinese philosophy believes that "yin" and "yang" are the two major opposite elements permeating throughout everything in the universe. Influenced by this belief, the ancients also developed the concepts of "ji" (odd numbers) and "ou" (even numbers) in the aspect of numerical calculation in order to grasp the composition and change of things. Observing and contemplating the separation and combination of *ji* and *ou* ultimately became an important feature of the ancient Chinese way of thinking. Most of the 12 Chinese zodiac animals are either odd- or even-toed except for the rat, which has the forefoot of four toes and the hindfoot of five toes. The rat's "preciousness" is evident through the "scarcity" expressed in its having parity in the same body with the unity of *yin* and *yang*. In ancient China, a day was divided into 12 double-hour periods, in which the hour of *Zi*, starting from 11 o'clock at night and ending at 1 o'clock in the morning, signaled the time of "heaven breaking with a rat bite," given the rat's nocturnal nature. Thus, it is logical to rank the "rat of *Zi*" as the head of the 12 Chinese zodiac signs.

On the occasion of the upcoming Year of the Rat, I hope that the exquisite postal products produced by CTT will deliver the bountiful New Year's greetings and the cultural wisdom of the Chinese zodiac over vast time and space.

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