

chinese

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Chinese Zodiac (Shengxiao ??)

The shengxiao — ??, "birth likeness", also called ??? shí'èr shengxiào, the twelve birth signs — assigns an animal to each year in a repeating cycle of twelve. Ask someone their sign in Chinese and you are asking what year they were born, not what month.

It is not a constellation zodiac

This is the correction most Western writing gets wrong, and everything else on this page depends on it.

The shengxiao divides no sky. There is no ecliptic here, no 30-degree arc, no constellation the Rat is drawn from, no rising sign, no houses. The twelve animals are labels stuck onto the twelve **Earthly Branches** (?? *dìzhi*), an abstract counting series that Chinese scribes were already using to number days centuries before anyone attached an animal to it. The branches are a base-twelve counter. The animals are mnemonics for that counter.

Chinese astronomy did divide the sky, richly — into the twenty-eight lunar mansions (? *xiù*) and the three enclosures — and that system is not this one. When a horoscope column tells you the Rat is "in" some part of the heavens, it is importing a Western idea that the shengxiao never had.

The invention calendar

The system was assembled in pieces over roughly a thousand years. These are the dated joints.

Date	Event	What it added
c. 1200–1100 BCE	Shang oracle bones at Anyang record days using the ten Heavenly Stems and twelve Earthly Branches	The counting apparatus — stems and branches, no animals
722–481 BCE	Eclipses in the <i>Spring and Autumn Annals</i>	Evidence the 60-day count ran unbroken through this period, and probably back into the Shang
c. 230–220 BCE	Fangmatan tomb 1, Tianshui, Gansu (excavated 1986) — <i>rishu</i> ?? almanacs among the slips	An early branch-and-creature divination list, with a different animal set
c. 217 BCE	Shuihudi tomb 11, Yunmeng, Hubei (found December 1975) — the <i>rishu</i> "Thief" (??) section	The earliest known list matching animals to branches
246 BCE, recorded by 168 BCE	Mawangdui tomb 3 silk manuscripts, sealed 168 BCE, note 246 BCE as <i>yimao</i> ??	Sexagenary notation applied to a year rather than a day
202 BCE – 8 CE	Western Han administration	The sexagenary year-count becomes ordinary bureaucratic timekeeping

76–84 CE	Wang Chong's <i>Lunheng</i> ?? (published 80 CE, probably finished 82–83)	The first complete surviving twelve, in the order still used
1st century CE	The same <i>Lunheng</i>	Earliest written record of Tai Sui, the deity behind the cycle's religious life
7th–early 8th century CE	Kitora Tomb, Asuka, Japan: twelve animal-headed human figures painted on the chamber walls	Among the oldest surviving zodiac murals in East Asia — the system is in Japan
1025 / 1027 CE	The 60-year cycle brought into Tibet, attributed to Chandranath and Tsilu Pandit; the first <i>rabjung</i> cycle begins 1027	The Tibetan branch of the system
2 January 1912	The Republic of China adopts the Gregorian calendar	Two calendars in parallel; the zodiac year detaches from the civil year
1929–1934	The Nationalist government's <i>Kuomin</i> calendar omits traditional dates, attempting to abolish the lunar calendar; the ban is lifted in 1934	The last serious state attempt to end the reckoning — it failed

Two things in that table deserve saying plainly.

The Great Race is not in it. The story where the Jade Emperor holds a race and the Rat rides the Ox across the river is late folklore. It is a charming explanation invented long after the order it explains. The order came from a counting series.

The early animal lists disagree with the modern one. The Shuihudi "Thief" section already has the rat, ox, tiger and rabbit where we expect them, but later slots hold ? (a worm or insect), ? (deer), ?? (old sheep), and entries read as ? and ? that scholars still argue over — and the dragon and snake are not there in their familiar form. Fangmatan differs again. The twelve were not handed down whole; they settled.

The Jupiter rationale is a theory, not a proven origin. Jupiter orbits in about 11.86 years, close enough to twelve that Chinese astronomers divided its circuit into twelve stations and tracked a counter-orbital shadow-body, **Tai Sui** (??), running the other way. Whether the twelve branches were derived from Jupiter or merely later reconciled with it is unsettled; the branches are attested as a day-counter first.

The mechanics

Ten Heavenly Stems (?? *tiangan*) run against twelve Earthly Branches. Because 10 and 12 share a factor of 2, they do not produce 120 combinations but **60** — the sexagenary cycle, ????, which has been the standard unit of Chinese chronology for two millennia.

The stems carry the five phases, two stems to each phase, yang then yin:

Stems	Phase	
? <i>jia</i> / ? <i>yi</i>	Wood	yang / yin
? <i>bing</i> / ? <i>ding</i>	Fire	yang / yin
? <i>wù</i> / ? <i>ji</i>	Earth	yang / yin
? <i>geng</i> / ? <i>xin</i>	Metal	yang / yin
? <i>rén</i> / ? <i>gui</i>	Water	yang / yin

That pairing is why each element appears to "cover" two consecutive years — 2024 Wood Dragon, 2025 Wood Snake; 2026 Fire Horse, 2027 Fire Goat. It is not that the element lasts two years. It is that the yang stem and the yin stem of the same phase fall next to each other.

Note the two different elements attached to every animal. The **year element** comes from the stem and changes each time the animal comes round — the Dragon is Wood in 2024 and was Water in 2012. The **fixed element** belongs to the branch itself and never changes; the Dragon's branch is always Earth. Writing that conflates the two produces nonsense.

Every animal therefore returns every 12 years, but a specific pillar — ?? Fire Horse, say — returns only every 60.

Where the year turns

Not on 1 January, and not on your birthday. The zodiac year turns at **Lunar New Year**, the new moon nearest *lichun*. Someone born in late January 2026 was born in a Snake year, not a Horse year.

These are the boundary dates the site uses, straight from its LUNAR_NEW_YEAR table:

Year	Lunar New Year	Sign
2024	10 February	Wood Dragon ??
2025	29 January	Wood Snake ??
2026	17 February	Fire Horse ??
2027	6 February	Fire Goat ??
2028	26 January	Earth Monkey ??
2029	13 February	Earth Rooster ??
2030	3 February	Metal Dog ??
2031	23 January	Metal Pig ??
2032	11 February	Water Rat ??
2033	31 January	Water Ox ??
2034	19 February	Wood Tiger ??
2035	8 February	Wood Rabbit ??

This boundary is genuinely disputed. Chinese civil practice increments the count at Lunar New Year. Many practising astrologers instead use the solar-term year, which begins at *lichun* ?? around 4 February and ignores the moon entirely. In most years the two agree; in years where the new moon falls after 4 February — 2026 among them, with Lunar New Year on 17 February — they disagree for a stretch of days, and two competent practitioners will give a February baby two different signs. Neither is a mistake. They are different conventions, and anyone who tells you there is one right answer is not describing the tradition accurately.

A third wrinkle: the calculation is location-sensitive. Modern Chinese calendars compute the new moon against Chinese Standard Time rather than Beijing local time, which can move a boundary by a day.

Religion

The animals themselves are not worshipped. What is worshipped is the year.

Daoism and Tai Sui. Tai Sui, Jupiter's counter-orbital double, became a deity, then sixty deities — the Taisui Xingjun, one general for each pillar of the sexagenary cycle, under the supreme command of Yin Jiao. Each year four signs are held to clash with the reigning general, and the remedy is ritual: the *an taisui* ??? rite performed at temples as the lunar year opens, with a talisman good for the year. Taiwanese temples run this at scale every New Year. Traditional geomancy also forbids building or moving house toward Tai Sui's direction in the relevant year.

Buddhism. Chinese Buddhism absorbed the twelve rather than fighting them. They were identified with the **Twelve Heavenly Generals** — the yaksha guardians of Bhaisajyaguru, the Medicine Buddha, named in the Medicine Buddha Sutra. Each general took an animal and a double-hour, so the twelve stand around the healing Buddha as a working clock. The identification is not consistent between countries: Kimbhira answers to the boar in the Chinese scheme and the rat in the Japanese one.

Folk custom is not doctrine. Marriage compatibility by triad, *benmingnian* dread, red underwear, choosing a Dragon year to conceive — none of this is taught by Daoist or Buddhist doctrine. It is popular practice that grew alongside both and is often observed by people with no religious commitment at all, the way a European might avoid the number thirteen.

The twelve

Animal	Character	Branch	Hours	Fixed element	Direction	Season	Polarity
Rat	? <i>shu</i>	? <i>zi</i>	23:00–01:00	Water	North	Winter	Yang
Ox	? <i>niú</i>	? <i>chou</i>	01:00–03:00	Earth	NNE	Winter	Yin
Tiger	? <i>hu</i>	? <i>yín</i>	03:00–05:00	Wood	ENE	Spring	Yang
Rabbit	? <i>tù</i>	? <i>mao</i>	05:00–07:00	Wood	East	Spring	Yin
Dragon	? <i>lóng</i>	? <i>chén</i>	07:00–09:00	Earth	ESE	Spring	Yang
Snake	? <i>shé</i>	? <i>sì</i>	09:00–11:00	Fire	SSE	Summer	Yin
Horse	? <i>ma</i>	? <i>wu</i>	11:00–13:00	Fire	South	Summer	Yang
Goat	? <i>yáng</i>	? <i>wèi</i>	13:00–15:00	Earth	SSW	Summer	Yin
Monkey	? <i>hóu</i>	? <i>shen</i>	15:00–17:00	Metal	WSW	Autumn	Yang
Rooster	? <i>jī</i>	? <i>you</i>	17:00–19:00	Metal	West	Autumn	Yin
Dog	? <i>gou</i>	? <i>xu</i>	19:00–21:00	Earth	WNW	Autumn	Yang
Pig	? <i>zhu</i>	? <i>hài</i>	21:00–23:00	Water	NNW	Winter	Yin

The hours are the *shichen* ??, the old double-hours: twelve to a day, one per branch, the Rat's straddling midnight. The directions run clockwise from ? at north, which is why ?? *ziwu* — Rat and Horse, north and south, midnight and noon — is the Chinese term for the meridian line.

The four triads

Signs four apart form a **triad** (?? *sanhé*), the basis of folk compatibility:

- **Rat, Dragon, Monkey** — the doers

- **Ox, Snake, Rooster** — the steady and exacting
- **Tiger, Horse, Dog** — the loyal and headlong
- **Rabbit, Goat, Pig** — the gentle

Signs six apart are held to **clash** (?? *xiangchong*): Rat–Horse, Ox–Goat, Tiger–Monkey, Rabbit–Rooster, Dragon–Dog, Snake–Pig.

Beyond China

The cycle travelled with Chinese writing and Buddhist texts, and every place that took it changed something. **Vietnam** keeps the water buffalo for the ox and, famously, the **cat** for the rabbit — usually explained by the nearness of the branch name ? *mao* to Vietnamese *mèo*, cat. **Japan** keeps the sheep for the goat and the wild boar for the pig. **Korea** uses the sheep. **Thailand** puts a *naga* where the dragon stands. **Tibet** counts hare, bird, boar and sheep. Turkic and Kazakh calendars vary several slots again. The counter is the same everywhere; the mascots are local.

How this site computes it

The CHINA chip in the breadcrumb bar is produced by `chineseYearInfo()`. It takes today's date, rolls the year back by one if the date falls before that year's Lunar New Year boundary, then reads the animal from $(\text{year} - 4) \bmod 12$ and the element and stem from $(\text{year} - 4) \bmod 10$. No ephemeris, no network, no live astronomy — the boundary dates are a lookup table covering 2024–2035, with a fallback of 4 February outside that range, which is the *lichun* convention rather than the lunar one.

It is a cultural display. It tells you what the year is called. It is not a claim that the name predicts anything.

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- [World Zodiacs](#) — the other six systems in the celestial row.
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