

The Great Race of the Zodiac

Yiming Pan



Long ago, the Jade Emperor kept hearing people complain that they did not know how to measure time, which made daily life very inconvenient. So, the Jade Emperor came up with an idea...

On the day of his birthday, the Jade Emperor announced some exciting news: he would hold a river-crossing race. Any animals that could successfully cross the river and reach the finish line would be ranked by their order of arrival.

The first twelve would be chosen, and their names would be used to count the years.







The Cat and the Rat were good friends, but neither of them was good at swimming, so they were deeply worried about the coming race. Just then, they overheard the Ox passing by and muttering to himself, “Sigh, my eyesight is so poor that I can barely tell east from west. How could I possibly win the race?”

The Rat quickly seized the opportunity and said to the Ox, “Dear Brother Ox, why not let the Cat and me ride on your back? We can show you the right direction, and we can cross the river together.”

After thinking for a moment, the Ox accepted the Rat’s suggestion. “Alright then, it’s settled. The three of us will cross the river together.” The Cat immediately felt relieved and even praised the Rat for being so quick-witted.

The night before the race, the Rat slept very deeply. He was still sound asleep even after daybreak.

Early in the morning, the Cat got up and hurried to the Rat's house. He knocked hard on the wooden door and shouted, "Rat! Wake up! Don't forget—we have to win first place in the race!"

After the Rat had washed his face and got dressed, the two good friends set off together





After the race began, the Cat and the Rat jumped onto the Ox's back, one after the other, and began crossing the river.



The Rat also cheered loudly, "Come on, Brother Ox!"





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“Victory will surely belong to the three of us! Ha ha!” shouted the Cat.

The Rat also cheered loudly, “Come on, Brother Ox!”



He suddenly thrust the pole in his hands forward with all his strength, pushing the Cat off the Ox's back







“Sorry, brother,” said the Rat to the Cat, who was struggling in the river.

“I can’t let you fight me for first place!”

Just as the Ox reached the riverbank and was about to step ashore, the Rat leapt down from his head, rushed straight to the Jade Emperor, and became the first animal to reach the finish line.





Because of the Rat's trick, the hardworking Ox, who had swum with all his strength, only came in second.

The Jade Emperor declared, "I hereby announce that the Rat is first, and the Ox is second."



Not long after, the Tiger, drenched from head to tail, clawed his way onto the shore on all fours and claimed third place.





The next to arrive was the Rabbit. He chose a different strategy—carefully stepping on the large stones in the river, hopping from one to another as he made his way across.



After a while, the Dragon swooped down.

“I was delayed making rain for those in need,” he said.

The kind Dragon came in fifth







Just then, the Jade Emperor heard the sound of hooves and thought the Horse would be the next to arrive. Just as he was about to announce it, the cunning Snake suddenly darted out from the grass and seized sixth place.

“Hiss—!” Startled, the Horse leapt back in fright and came in seventh.



The Goat, the Monkey, and the Rooster arrived together, leaping down one after another from a large wooden raft. Pleased by their cooperation, the Jade Emperor announced,

“Eighth, ninth, and tenth place go to the Goat, the Monkey, and the Rooster.”

Next to arrive was the Dog. Soon after, the Pig, panting and out of breath, took the final place.





With all twelve animals chosen, they were just about to celebrate when a sudden “meow” was heard. Everyone turned to look...





Soaked from head to toe, the Cat called out from behind,

“Jade Emperor... I... I made it.”

“Little one, what a pity—you are just one step too late,” the Jade Emperor replied with sympathy.



“It’s all your fault, you faithless creature! I will never forgive you!”

the Cat roared at the Rat in fury.

From that day on, the two friends became enemies. Whenever the Cat saw the Rat, he remembered what had happened and tried every way to catch and eat him. The Rat, knowing he was in the wrong, would quickly hide whenever he spotted the Cat from afar.

And so, the way we count the years today is based on the names of these twelve animals, known as the Chinese Zodiac: Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Goat, Monkey, Rooster, Dog, and Pig.



A retelling of the legendary Chinese Zodiac race
through linocut-style illustrations
inspired by traditional folklore.

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