

THE LEGEND OF THE CHINESE ZODIAC

A long, long time ago the Jade Emperor wanted to find a means of measuring time, and so he organised a race, and invited all the animals to take part. When they had all lined up on the bank of the river the Emperor explained that to win the big prize - a permanent place in the Zodiac – they would have to be one of the first twelve to cross the swiftly flowing river and reach a designated spot on the opposite shore. Their order in the cycle would be decided by the order in which they finished the race. And so the race began.

The cat wondered how she would get across if she was afraid of water. At the same time, the ox wondered how he would cross with his poor eyesight. The rat suggested that he and the cat jump onto the ox's back and guide him across. But as they were crossing the river, the rat snuck up behind the unsuspecting cat and pushed her into the water. Just as the ox came lumbering ashore, the rat jumped off and raced over the line first, closely followed by the ox. By the time the cat had managed to save herself from drowning and reached the finishing line it was too late for her to win any place in the calendar, and so she vowed to be the enemy of the rat forever after.

After the ox came the tiger, out of breath as she explained to the emperor how difficult it had been to cross the river with the strong currents dragging her downstream all the time. But because she was so strong she had eventually made it to shore and so was named the third animal in the cycle.

Just then there was a flash of fur and whiskers, and out of nowhere appeared the rabbit. He explained that he had crossed the river by jumping onto a floating log that had at first moved rapidly downstream, but had then suddenly been washed to shore. Thus he became the fourth animal in the zodiac cycle.

Coming in fifth place was the dragon, flapping his great wings and breathing fire into the air. The Emperor was very interested to know to why such a great creature like the dragon, who could fly, hadn't managed to arrive first. The dragon explained that he had been close to finishing when he saw a poor helpless rabbit clinging to a log that was being washed downstream. He therefore stopped and gave a mighty puff of breath to blow the log to the shore. By the time this good deed had been done, four of the other animals had already arrived.

No sooner had the dragon reached the finish line than the sound of galloping hooves was heard and the horse appeared. Hidden in the horse's mane was the snake, who hissed and moved just before the horse crossed the line. The horse got such a shock that she reared up and before she could recover the snake had slithered off her back and crossed the line in sixth place, beating the horse into seventh.

Not long after that, the sheep, monkey and rooster reached the bank of the river together. These three animals had helped each other all through the race. The rooster had found some logs tied together, and invited the other two creatures to go with it. The sheep and the monkey had worked together to clear the weeds, pulled and pushed and eventually managed to get to the other side. This cooperation greatly pleased the Emperor and he promptly declared that the sheep was eighth, the monkey ninth, and the rooster tenth.

Some time later the dog arrived in eleventh place. The Emperor expressed surprise that it had taken her so long despite the fact she was a better swimmer than most of the other animals. The dog explained that it was precisely her love of the water that had delayed her – it had been so refreshing that she simply couldn't resist playing around for a while. Just as the emperor was wondering if no other animal would reach the finish, an oink, oink, oink was heard and of the pig came waddling into view. To nobody's surprise he related how he hadn't been able to resist the temptation of stopping and filling his belly with acorns. After that he had felt the need for a nap, and had only woken up a short time before. And so the pig became the twelfth and last animal of the zodiac cycle.

THE END