



ARTS & CULTURE

Year of the Cat or Year of the Rabbit?

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Many people in Asia and around the world will celebrate the Lunar New Year starting on January 22.

The new year is called the Year of the Rabbit in China and the Year of the Cat in Vietnam. How the cat replaced the rabbit in Vietnam is still the subject of debate.

Both countries follow a **calendar** based on 12 signs of a **zodiac** represented by 12 animals.

No one knows exactly how the 12 animals came to be named. But ancient storytellers said the Jade Emperor, or the Buddha, organized a race across a river for all the animals in the world. The first 12 to reach the other side would appear in the zodiac.

In the Chinese version of the story, the cat and the rat were riding across a river on an ox when the rat pushed the cat into the water. The rat won the race, turning the two animals into enemies. That is why cats have been hunting rats ever since.

In the Chinese story, the rabbit crossed the river by jumping on the tops of stones in the river. When the rabbit got there, no others were around, so it went off to the side and slept. By the time the rabbit woke up, three others had already arrived.

However, in the Vietnamese version – which did not have a rabbit – the cat could swim and ended up arriving fourth. The top twelve finishers which appear in the zodiac were rat, ox, tiger, cat (or rabbit), dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig.

Philippe Papin is an expert on Vietnamese history at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris. He told the [Northwest Asian Weekly](#) in 2011 that one possible explanation for replacing rabbit with cat might have to do with language.

He said in old Chinese, there is a little-used word tied to the sign of the rabbit (卯) that is pronounced like mao. The **pronunciation** is similar to mèo, the Vietnamese word for cat.

The Chinese New Year [website](#) says males who are born in the Year of the Rabbit are polite and do whatever they can to avoid conflicts. They like organizing and often help their wives with work around the house.

Females born in the Year of the Rabbit, the website says, love being social. They are also thoughtful and **polite**. And they hate violence and arguments.

The Year of the Cat last came around in 2011. The website Vietnam+ [reported](#) at the time that the number of newborn babies increased in the first days of the Lunar New Year, called Tet in Vietnam. At a hospital in Ho Chi Minh City, 72,000 pregnant women visited the hospital in January, an increase of 19,000 over the year before. Doctors said that the Year of Cat is considered a lucky year.

This year, another website, VNExpress, [said](#) many Vietnamese are buying new cat-**themed** cases for their mobile phones. And one of the top Google searches in Vietnam is "why there is no cat in the Chinese zodiac."

I'm Jill Robbins.

Hai Do wrote this report for VOA Learning English with additional information from [Chinese New Year](#) and [Chinese Zodiac](#).

Words in This Story

calendar -*n.* an account of the days and weeks of the year

zodiac -*v.* a way of dividing years or parts of years following a system of special names and signs that some cultures have observed for a long time

pronunciation -*n.* the sound of the way a word is said

polite -*adj.* showing respect for other people; showing good behavior

-themed -adj. a subject that is repeated again and again

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