

THE YEAR OF THE RAT

The Year of the Rat begins on February 7, 2008, and runs until January 25, 2009. It is calculated according to the Chinese Lunar Calendar that is based on the phases of the moon. This calendar dated from 2600 BC, when the Emperor Huang Ti introduced the first cycle of the zodiac. There are 12 years in each cycle of the zodiac, with each year named after an animal. The rat marks the beginning of this 12-year cycle, followed by the ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, ram, monkey, rooster, dog and boar.

In Chinese ancient legend, the rat is the first animal in the Chinese zodiac. This originated from a competition, in which the Jade Emperor asked all animals to meet him on Chinese New Year. In one legend, the rat, being a bad swimmer, crossed the river on the back of the ox. After crossing the river, the rat jumped ahead and arrived first.

The Chinese zodiac animals symbolize twelve types of personality. People born in the year of the rat are charming, industrious, eloquent, imaginative and generous to the ones they love, though they may also be intolerant, manipulative and too critical. People born in 2008, the year of the *yang* rat, are bright, pleasant, adaptable and sociable. Previous Years of the Rat include 1924, 1936, 1948, 1960, 1972, 1984 and 1996.

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CHINESE NEW YEAR

In Chinese, “New Year” is literally “*xin nian*”, with “*xin*” meaning “new” and “*nian*” meaning “year”. However, “*nian*” has quite a terrifying origin. According to Chinese mythology, long ago in ancient China, there was a beast from the mountains (some versions say under the sea) coming out every twelve months near winter to eat human beings. People soon realized that this beast could be scared away by loud noises, such as the sound of firecrackers and fireworks, the drums and gongs heralding a lion dance, as well as the red color.

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These ways used to drive away the beast called “*nian*” also became essential features in Chinese New Year celebrations, in which new year decorations are usually in red, and married couples and elders give red packets to children and juniors. It is also common to decorate homes with auspicious words and phrases written in Chinese calligraphy on red paper, such as those found on the top right and bottom left of this page. People visit their relatives and friends to greet one another a Happy New Year. While people from different regions of China may prepare different kinds of food to celebrate Chinese New Year, such as eating dumpling in Northern China, the names of the food are meant to be synonymous with auspicious wishes, such as “*yu*” meaning “fish” sounds like “*yu*” meaning abundance and surpluses.

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Top Right: *Gongxi Facai* (May you be prosperous)
Bottom Left: *Nian Nian You Yu* (May there be surpluses every year)