

Classroom Resources — Free on This Site

Every resource below is free on *ChineseZodiac.com* — print copies for students or display them on your classroom screen. No login needed.

REFERENCE

The Legend of the Great Race

The full story behind the sequencing and story activities.

chinesezodiac.com/learn/great-race

REFERENCE

The Five Elements

Deep dive on the Five Elements cycle used in Activity 3.

chinesezodiac.com/elements

REFERENCE

Chinese New Year Guide

The traditions behind the Lunar New Year facts in Activity 4.

chinesezodiac.com/chinese-new-year

REFERENCE

Zodiac Year Chart (1924–2031)

Answer-check chart for the birth-year math in Activity 6.

chinesezodiac.com/years

PRINTABLE

Zodiac Paper-Cutting Templates

Animal silhouette templates for the paper-cutting craft in Activity 7.

chinesezodiac.com/printables/jianzhi-templates

Notes for Teachers

- Pick and choose. The eight activities run about 90 minutes in total, but each one stands alone. Use two or three for a single class period, or set them up as stations and rotate small groups every ten minutes.
- Frame it with care. Tell students up front that the zodiac is a tradition with deep cultural meaning, much like a folktale or a holiday custom. The animal "traits" come from old stories, not from science, and they do not describe any real person.
- Lean on what students bring. If you have students who celebrate the Lunar New Year, invite them to share a family custom, but never put anyone on the spot. Their experience is a gift to the class, not an assignment.

- Watch the pronunciation. The Mandarin terms (hongbao, jianzhi) are written with pinyin. The numbers next to vowels in some textbooks mark tones; here they are left off to keep it simple for young readers. Say the words slowly and let students try.
- Differentiate by output, not by content. Younger students can draw their answers; older students can write a paragraph or argue a point. The same prompt fits a wide range.

Materials Master List

Gather these once and you are set for the whole kit. Most activities need only a pencil.

- This printed packet, one per student (or one per station)
- Pencils, erasers, and a few colored pencils or crayons
- Plain paper and a few sheets of red paper or red construction paper
- Safety scissors
- Tape or glue sticks
- A wall calendar or a board to write dates (for the calendar activity)
- Optional: a world map or a map of East Asia
- Optional: index cards for the sorting and matching games

Activity 1 — Match the Animal to Its Trait

Type	Time	Grades	Grouping
Matching	10 minutes	Grades 3-8	Individual or pairs

Materials: Pencil

In the tradition, each zodiac animal carries a set of story-traits. People born in that animal's year are said to share them, the way a folktale gives a fox cleverness or a tortoise patience. Draw a line from each animal to the trait most often linked with it. Remind students that these are story-traits tied to a birth year, not facts about any real person.

- Rat — Quick-witted and resourceful
- Ox — Hardworking and patient
- Tiger — Brave and bold
- Rabbit — Gentle and careful
- Dragon — Confident and lucky
- Snake — Wise and thoughtful
- Horse — Energetic and free-spirited
- Goat — Calm and kind
- Monkey — Clever and playful

- Rooster — Proud and observant
- Dog — Loyal and honest
- Pig — Generous and easygoing

Bonus: Pick the animal whose trait sounds most like you. Write one sentence about a time you showed that trait.

Activity 2 — Put the Zodiac in Order

Type	Time	Grades	Grouping
Sequencing	10 minutes	Grades 3-6	Individual or small groups

Materials: Pencil, Optional: scissors and index cards

The twelve animals always follow the same fixed order, and that order comes from the legend of the Great Race (see Activity 5). Number the animals from 1 to 12 in the order they finished the race. If you have index cards, write one animal on each, shuffle them, and race to lay them out in order.

- Rat (1)
- Ox (2)
- Tiger (3)
- Rabbit (4)
- Dragon (5)
- Snake (6)
- Horse (7)
- Goat (8)
- Monkey (9)
- Rooster (10)
- Dog (11)
- Pig (12)

Challenge: The cycle repeats every twelve years. If this is the Year of the Dragon, what animal comes three years from now? (Count forward: Snake, Horse, Goat.)

Activity 3 — The Five Elements Wheel

Type	Time	Grades	Grouping
Diagram and coloring	15 minutes	Grades 4-8	Individual

Materials: Pencil, Colored pencils or crayons (green, red, yellow, gray, blue)

The zodiac animals pair with five elements that flow in a circle. In the "generating" cycle each element feeds the next: Wood feeds Fire, Fire makes Earth as ash, Earth holds Metal as ore, Metal carries Water as the drops that form on cool metal, and Water grows Wood. Draw the five elements spaced evenly around a circle. Add an arrow from each element to the one it feeds, so the arrows make a ring. Color each element its traditional color.

1. Draw a large circle and mark five points around it, like the numbers on a clock at 12, 2, 5, 7, and 10.
 2. Label the points, going clockwise: Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, Water.
 3. Draw a curved arrow from each element to the next one clockwise. The last arrow loops from Water back to Wood.
 4. Color the labels: wood green, fire red, earth yellow, metal white (outline the letters so they stay visible), water blue or black.
 5. Under the wheel, write one sentence explaining why the cycle never ends.
- Wood → Fire
 - Fire → Earth
 - Earth → Metal
 - Metal → Water
 - Water → Wood

Think about it: Each element joins with the animals for a set of years, so a person might be a Wood Tiger or a Water Rabbit. The element changes the flavor of the animal, the way a color changes a drawing.

Activity 4 — Lunar New Year Facts and Questions

Type	Time	Grades	Grouping
Reading and short answer	15 minutes	Grades 3-8	Individual or pairs

Materials: Pencil

Read these facts about the Lunar New Year, also called Chinese New Year or the Spring Festival, then answer the questions in the answer key. The festival follows the lunar calendar, so its date shifts each year, usually falling between late January and mid-February. Families clean the house

to sweep away the old year's bad luck, share a big reunion dinner, and give red envelopes (hongbao) with money tucked inside. Red is everywhere because it stands for luck and joy. The celebration lasts about fifteen days and ends with the Lantern Festival, when people hang glowing lanterns and eat sweet rice balls.

- The date changes each year because the festival follows the moon.
- Families clean the house to sweep away bad luck before the new year.
- Red stands for luck and happiness.
- Red envelopes (hongbao) hold money and good wishes.
- The whole celebration runs about fifteen days.
- The Lantern Festival closes the New Year season.

Compare: How is the Lunar New Year like a holiday your own family celebrates? Name one thing that is similar and one thing that is different.

Activity 5 — Map the Great Race

Type	Time	Grades	Grouping
Reading, geography, and drawing	15 minutes	Grades 3-7	Small groups

Materials: Pencil, Plain paper, Optional: map of East Asia

The order of the zodiac comes from the legend of the Great Race. The Jade Emperor called all the animals to race across a wide river. The first twelve to cross would each have a year named for them. The Rat could not swim well, so it rode on the kind Ox's back, then leaped off its nose at the shore to finish first. The Ox came second. The Tiger swam hard and came third, and the Rabbit hopped across stones and a floating log to come fourth. The Dragon could fly but stopped to send rain to dry fields, so it came fifth, with the Snake sixth. The Horse came seventh, then the Goat, Monkey, and Rooster, who worked together on a raft. The Dog splashed and played and came eleventh, and the Pig, who paused to eat and nap, came last. The Cat never made the list at all, and stories say that is why cats chase rats to this day.

1. Draw a simple map of the race: a starting bank, a wide river in the middle, and a finish bank.
2. Draw or label the river crossing for at least four animals, showing how each one got across.
3. Mark the finish order with small numbers, 1 through 12.
4. Add the Cat somewhere on the bank, still trying to cross, to show why it was left out.

Discuss: The Rat won by being clever rather than strong or fast. Was that fair? Write two sentences giving your opinion and one reason.

Activity 6 — Zodiac Birthday Math

Type	Time	Grades	Grouping
Math and sorting	15 minutes	Grades 4–8	Individual or pairs

Materials: Pencil, A list of birth years for the class (optional)

Because the cycle repeats every twelve years, you can find an animal for any year with simple math. The Year of the Rat lands on years like 1996, 2008, and 2020. To find any animal, count forward from a Rat year: one year later is the Ox, two later is the Tiger, and so on around the twelve. Work the problems below, then sort the class by animal if you like.

1. A Rat year is 2020. What animal is 2021? (Count one forward.)
2. What animal is 2024? (Count four forward from 2020.)
3. Pick your own birth year and figure out your animal by counting from the nearest Rat year.
4. If three friends are 12 years apart in age, what do their zodiac animals have in common?

Sorting: Make a bar chart of how many students in the class share each animal. Which animal is most common in your room?

Activity 7 — Make a Paper-Cutting (Jianzhi)

Type	Time	Grades	Grouping
Craft	20 minutes	Grades 3–8	Individual

Materials: Red paper or red construction paper, Safety scissors, Tape

Jianzhi is the Chinese folk art of cutting designs from paper, often red, to decorate windows and doors for the Lunar New Year. The cuts are symmetrical, so a small snip opens into a balanced pattern when the paper unfolds. Make your own to hang in a window.

1. Fold a square of red paper in half, then in half again, so you have a smaller square.
2. With safety scissors, snip small shapes along the folded edges: triangles, half-circles, and curves. Do not cut all the way across.
3. Unfold the paper to reveal a symmetrical design.
4. For a challenge, lightly draw half of this year's zodiac animal against a fold, then cut it out so it opens into a full animal.
5. Tape your design to a window so the light shines through.

Reflect: Symmetry means both halves match. Where else in nature or in your home do you see symmetry?

Activity 8 — Write Your Own Zodiac Story

Type	Time	Grades	Grouping
Creative writing	20 minutes	Grades 4-8	Individual

Materials: Pencil, Plain paper

The Great Race explains why the animals are in their order. Now invent your own short legend. Imagine a thirteenth animal that arrived just after the Pig. Why was it late? What did it do along the way? Use the legend as your model: a clear goal, a journey with a problem, and an ending that explains something.

1. Choose your thirteenth animal. It can be real or made up.
2. Give it one strong trait, the way the Rat is clever and the Ox is patient.
3. Tell how it crossed the river and why it arrived last.
4. End with a line that explains something, the way the real legend explains why cats chase rats.

Share: Read your legend aloud to a partner. Ask them to name the trait your animal showed.

Answer Key

Activity 1: Which animal is the first in the zodiac, and what is its main trait?

The Rat, said to be quick-witted and resourceful.

Activity 2: List the twelve animals in their fixed order.

Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Goat, Monkey, Rooster, Dog, Pig.

Activity 3: In the generating cycle, which element does Wood feed?

Fire. The full cycle is Wood feeds Fire, Fire makes Earth, Earth holds Metal, Metal carries Water, and Water grows Wood.

Activity 4: Why does the date of the Lunar New Year change each year?

Because it follows the lunar (moon-based) calendar, which does not line up exactly with the solar calendar.

Activity 4: What does the color red stand for, and what is inside a hongbao?

Red stands for luck and happiness. A hongbao (red envelope) holds money, given with good wishes.

Activity 4: What festival ends the Lunar New Year season?

The Lantern Festival.

Activity 5: How did the Rat finish first, and why was the Cat left out?

The Rat rode across on the Ox's back, then jumped off at the shore to cross the line first. The Cat never finished the race, which old stories give as the reason cats chase rats.

Activity 6: If 2020 is the Year of the Rat, what animal is 2024?

The Dragon. Counting four years forward gives Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon.