

Classroom Resources — Free on This Site

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PRINTABLE

Zodiac Wheel Poster

The printable wheel of the twelve animals in order.

chinesezodiac.com/printables/zodiac-wheel-poster

PRINTABLE

Animal Flashcard Set

Animal cards for sorting and matching.

chinesezodiac.com/printables/flashcards

REFERENCE

The Five Elements

Five Elements reference with the associated colors and the generating cycle.

chinesezodiac.com/elements

REFERENCE

Zodiac Year Chart (1924–2031)

Birth-year lookup table with each year's animal and element.

chinesezodiac.com/years

REFERENCE

Chinese New Year Guide

Recent and upcoming Lunar New Year dates for the calendar work.

chinesezodiac.com/chinese-new-year

ACTIVITY

Zodiac Explorers Activity Kit

Eight more station-ready activities on the same topics.

chinesezodiac.com/teachers/activity-kits/zodiac-explorers

Learning Objectives

- Students will explain that the lunar calendar follows the moon and helps set the changing date of Lunar New Year.
- Students will describe the twelve-year animal cycle and locate their own zodiac animal on it.
- Students will name the Five Elements and explain that they combine with the animals over a longer cycle.
- Students will compare the lunar calendar with the solar calendar used at school, naming similarities and differences.
- Students will explain in their own words why the zodiac matters as cultural heritage.

- Students will distinguish a cultural tradition from a fortune-telling claim and give an example of each.

Standards Alignment

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.3 — Explain events, procedures, ideas, or concepts in a text, including what happened and why, based on specific information.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.7 — Draw on information from multiple print or digital sources to locate an answer or solve a problem efficiently.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.4.1 — Engage effectively in collaborative discussions, building on others' ideas and expressing one's own clearly.

C3 D2.His.2.3–5 — Compare life in specific historical time periods to life today.

Materials

- A simple lunar-calendar chart showing recent Lunar New Year dates and the late-January-to-February window
- A printable wheel or chart of the twelve animals in order
- A Five Elements reference chart with the associated colors
- A birth-year-to-zodiac lookup table that also lists the element for each year
- A world map or a map of Asia
- Notebooks and a short two-source reading on Lunar New Year
- Colored pencils or markers
- Index cards for the "tradition card" writing task

Key Vocabulary

lunar calendar: A calendar based on the cycles of the moon. The months follow the moon's phases.

solar calendar: A calendar based on the Earth's trip around the sun. The school calendar is a solar calendar.

cycle: A pattern that repeats. The zodiac animals repeat in a cycle every twelve years.

Five Elements: Wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. In the zodiac tradition, each element pairs with the animals over a longer pattern.

heritage: The traditions, stories, and customs passed down through families and communities over time.

fortune-telling: Claiming to predict the future. This is different from a tradition, which is something a community honors and shares.

Activities

Lunar vs. Solar Calendar Investigation (45 minutes)

Grouping: Whole class, then pairs

1. Open by pointing at the classroom calendar. Ask: "What does our calendar follow, and why do the same dates land on the same days every year?" Establish that the school calendar follows the sun and has fixed dates.
2. Introduce the lunar calendar. Show the chart of recent Lunar New Year dates and ask students to notice something: the date is different each year, always landing somewhere between late January and February.
3. Explain the why: the lunar calendar follows the moon, and the moon's cycle does not line up exactly with the sun's year, so the New Year date shifts.
4. In pairs, give students two minutes to list two ways the calendars are alike and two ways they differ. Circulate and listen for misconceptions.
5. Bring pairs back together and build a class T-chart on the board, "Lunar" on one side and "Solar" on the other.
6. Close with an exit prompt: "In one sentence, why does the date of Lunar New Year move?"

Materials for this activity: Lunar-calendar date chart; Classroom calendar; Notebooks

Differentiation & scaffolding:

- Support: Pre-fill one row of the T-chart so partners have a model to follow.
- Support: Provide a word bank (moon, sun, fixed, shifts, month, year).
- Stretch: Ask students to predict the rough date window for next year's Lunar New Year and explain their reasoning.

Find Your Sign and Element (40 minutes)

Grouping: Independent, then whole-class tally

1. Distribute the birth-year lookup table and the zodiac wheel. Demonstrate by finding your own birth year, naming the animal and element aloud.
2. Have each student find their birth-year animal and its element and write both in their notebook.
3. Create a class tally: go animal by animal and have students raise hands so you can count how many share each one. Note which animals are common and which are missing.
4. Point out the pattern: the same animal returns every twelve years, while the element shifts on a longer pattern, so two people born twelve years apart share an animal but may differ in element.
5. Stress the framing clearly: "Your sign tells us the year you were born. It is not a prediction about who you are or what will happen to you."
6. Have students sketch their animal on an index card and label it with the year and element to display on the wall.

Materials for this activity: Birth-year lookup table with elements; Zodiac wheel; Index cards; Colored pencils

Differentiation & scaffolding:

- Support: Highlight the rows for the most common student birth years ahead of time.
- Support: Pair students to check each other's lookups.
- Stretch: Ask students to figure out which animal a sibling or grandparent would be, using the twelve-year pattern instead of the table.

Why It Matters: Tradition Card (45 minutes)

Grouping: Independent reading, small-group share

1. Read the short two-source passage about how families celebrate Lunar New Year. Read once for the gist, then again to gather details.
2. Have students note one fact about the calendar and one fact about a celebration in their notebooks, citing which source each fact came from.
3. Lead a brief discussion: "What is the difference between honoring a tradition and using it to tell fortunes?" Build a two-column chart of examples.
4. Each student writes a "tradition card": three to four sentences explaining why the zodiac matters to the communities that keep it, using at least one fact from the reading.
5. In small groups, students read their cards aloud and give one another a specific compliment ("I liked how you...").
6. Post the cards on a bulletin board next to the animal index cards from the previous activity.

Materials for this activity: Two-source reading on Lunar New Year; Index cards; Notebooks

Differentiation & scaffolding:

- Support: Offer a sentence-starter strip ("The zodiac matters because...").
- Support: Read the passage aloud or provide an audio version for developing readers.
- Stretch: Ask students to add a sentence comparing the zodiac to a tradition their own family or community keeps.

Discussion Questions

Why does the date of Lunar New Year change every year, while your birthday on our calendar stays the same?

Sample answer: Our school calendar is a solar calendar with fixed dates, so birthdays land on the same date each year. Lunar New Year follows the moon-based calendar, which does not match the solar year exactly, so the date shifts and usually falls between late January and February.

Two cousins are born twelve years apart. What is true about their zodiac animals, and might their elements differ?

Sample answer: They share the same zodiac animal, because the animal cycle repeats every twelve years. Their elements may be different, because the element follows a longer pattern, so the same animal pairs with different elements over time.

How is honoring the zodiac as a tradition different from using it to tell fortunes?

Sample answer: Honoring it means learning the stories, sharing family customs, and respecting where it comes from. Telling fortunes means claiming the animal predicts your future or fixes your personality. The tradition is real cultural heritage; the prediction is a claim that is not supported by evidence.

Student Handout / Worksheet Prompts

Copy these prompts onto a worksheet or project them for students.

1. My birth year is _____. My zodiac animal is the _____. My element is _____.
2. List two ways the lunar calendar and the solar calendar are different.
3. The same zodiac animal comes back every _____ years. Explain how you know.
4. Name the Five Elements: _____, _____, _____, _____, _____.
5. Write three sentences explaining why the Chinese zodiac matters to the communities that celebrate it.
6. Give one example of honoring a tradition and one example of a fortune-telling claim. Explain the difference.

Extension & Homework

- Have students interview a family member or neighbor (with permission) about a calendar or holiday tradition and write a short paragraph comparing it to Lunar New Year.
- Research the date of Lunar New Year for the next three years and create a small poster showing the shifting window.
- Make a labeled zodiac wheel that includes both the animal order and the element colors.
- Connect to science: track the phases of the moon for two weeks and discuss how a calendar built on the moon would work.
- Keep going with the Zodiac Explorers Activity Kit — eight more station-ready activities on the same topics.

Assessment

Combine a short written exit task with the tradition card. Look for accurate explanation of the systems and respectful, evidence-based framing rather than fortune-telling language.

- Calendar: Student correctly explains why the Lunar New Year date shifts (the lunar calendar follows the moon and does not match the solar year).
- Cycle: Student states the twelve-year animal cycle and correctly locates at least one sign.
- Elements: Student names all five elements.
- Framing: Student distinguishes a tradition from a fortune-telling claim with a clear example of each.
- Sourcing: The tradition card uses at least one fact drawn from the reading.

Teacher's Guide

At this level, separate three layers so students do not blur them together. First, the lunar calendar is an astronomical system based on the moon. Second, the twelve-animal cycle is how years are named, repeating every twelve years. Third, the Five Elements (wood, fire, earth, metal, and water) pair with the animals across a longer cycle. Students often assume the element changes every year in lockstep with the animal; clarify that the element follows a longer pattern, so the same animal appears with different elements over time. Reinforce that a person's zodiac animal simply marks their birth year and is part of cultural heritage. It is not a horoscope that predicts behavior or the future. Use "Lunar New Year" or "Chinese New Year," and note that many cultures across Asia keep related but distinct traditions. When students find their sign, keep the tone playful and factual, and head off stereotypes by stressing that no animal makes a person smarter, luckier, or better than anyone else. Model respectful language throughout. Invite, but never require, students to share family customs, and treat each family's traditions as equally valid. If a student offers a fortune-telling claim ("I'm a dragon, so I'm brave"), gently reframe it: the animal tells us a birth year and is fun to learn about, and bravery comes from a person's choices, not their sign.

Answer Key

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

Because it follows the lunar (moon-based) calendar, which does not line up exactly with the solar calendar, so the date shifts, usually falling between late January and February.

How often does each zodiac animal come around again?

Every twelve years, because there are twelve animals in the cycle.

What are the Five Elements?

Wood, fire, earth, metal, and water.

Do the animal and the element change together every year?

No. The animal repeats every twelve years, while the element follows a longer pattern, so the same animal pairs with different elements over time.

Is your zodiac animal a prediction about your future?

No. It marks the year you were born and is part of cultural tradition. It does not predict your future or determine your personality.

What is the difference between a tradition and a fortune-telling claim?

A tradition is a custom a community honors and passes down, such as a Lunar New Year meal. A fortune-telling claim says the zodiac can predict the future or fix who you are, which is not supported by evidence.