

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.

PRINTABLE

Animal Flashcard Set

Print as the name signs each animal wears around the neck.

chinesezodiac.com/printables/flashcards

PRINTABLE

The Great Race Mini-Book

A foldable version of the story for the audience or early finishers.

chinesezodiac.com/printables/great-race-mini-book

Cast (16 roles)

Narrator 1

Narrator 2

Jade Emperor

Rat

Cat

Ox

Tiger

Rabbit

Dragon

Snake

Horse

Goat

Monkey

Rooster

Dog

Pig

Staging at a Glance

Set the stage with a long strip of blue cloth or paper running across the floor to be the river. Place the Jade Emperor's 'palace' at one end and the starting riverbank at the other. The twelve racing animals can wait in a loose group on the bank and cross the river one or two at a time as their turn comes. Keep the Cat asleep off to one side from Scene 2 onward, in full view of the audience, so its late waking lands at the end. The two narrators can stand at opposite front corners and trade off, which keeps the storytelling lively and gives more students a speaking part.

Script

Scene 1 — The Jade Emperor's Announcement

The heavens, long ago. The Jade Emperor stands center stage. Animals gather around, curious and excited.

Narrator 1: Long, long ago, when the world was still young, there was no way to count the years. People did not know how to name them or remember them.

Narrator 2: So the Jade Emperor, the great ruler of the heavens, came up with a plan. He called every animal in the land to come and hear him.

Jade Emperor: Listen, animals, all of you! I will hold a Great Race. You must cross the wide river and reach the gates of my palace.

Rat: A race? Did he say a race?

Jade Emperor: The first twelve animals to arrive will each have a year named in their honor. Those twelve years will repeat, over and over, forever.

Tiger: A whole year? Named after me? I will win it for certain. No one is stronger than a tiger!

Horse: Stronger, maybe. But no one is faster than a horse. The first year will be mine!

Rat: (quietly, to himself) I am small and slow. I will need to be clever instead.

Narrator 1: The Rat was the tiniest of all the animals. He knew he could never win with his legs alone.

Cat: Rat! Rat, my friend! You and I should race together. But you know how much I hate the water, and I do love my morning sleep.

Rat: Don't worry, Cat. We are best friends. I will wake you bright and early so we can go to the river side by side.

Cat: You promise? You won't forget me?

Rat: I promise. How could I ever forget my dearest friend?

Narrator 2: But the Rat wanted that first year more than anything. And a promise can be a heavy thing to carry when your heart is set on winning.

Scene 2 — The Morning of the Race

Dawn at the riverbank. A wide, cold river runs across the stage. The Cat is asleep at one side.

Narrator 1: The next morning, the Rat woke before the sun. He was so excited that he forgot all about his sleeping friend.

Rat: The race! The race is today! I must hurry to the river!

Cat: (asleep, peaceful) Zzz... zzz... zzz...

Narrator 2: The Rat ran past the Cat without a single glance. He raced down the path to the river, thinking only of winning.

Narrator 1: When he reached the bank, the water stretched wide and cold before him. The current was strong, and the far shore looked very far away.

Rat: Oh no. The river is so wide, and I am so small. I cannot swim all the way across. What will I do?

Narrator 2: Just then, the big, gentle Ox came down to the water, ready to wade in.

Ox: Good morning, little Rat. Why such a worried face on this fine racing day?

Rat: Oh, kind Ox, the river is too deep and too wide for someone as small as me. I will never make it across.

Ox: Then hop up onto my back. I am big and strong, and I can carry you over. There is no need for both of us to struggle.

Rat: You would do that for me? Thank you, Ox! You truly are the kindest animal in all the land.

Narrator 1: The Rat scrambled up onto the broad back of the Ox, and together they began to cross the river.

Scene 3 — Crossing the River

The middle of the river. The Ox wades steadily forward, the Rat riding high and dry on his back.

Ox: Slow and steady, that is how I do things. Step by step, we will reach the other side.

Rat: (comfortable) The view is wonderful up here! And my feet aren't even wet.

Narrator 2: The Ox could not see the Rat behind his great horns. He waded on, calm and patient, while the Rat began to think a sly thought.

Rat: (to himself) If I ride the Ox all the way, he will step onto the shore first, and he will win. But what if I am the one who steps off first?

Ox: Almost there now, little friend. The shore is just ahead. We will finish the race together, you and I!

Rat: Together? Oh, Ox... I'm sorry. But in a race, it is every animal for himself!

Narrator 1: Just as the Ox lifted his front hooves onto the bank, the Rat scrambled up his neck, leaped off the top of his head, and landed on the shore ahead of him!

Ox: Why... where did you... Rat! You tricked me!

Rat: First place! I'm first!

Scene 4 — The Animals Arrive

The palace gates. The Jade Emperor stands ready to name each finisher. Animals arrive one by one.

Jade Emperor: The Rat is first! Small and clever, you have outwitted them all. The first year of the cycle shall be the Year of the Rat.

Ox: (huffing onto shore) Well. I suppose clever beats strong sometimes. Second place is still a fine place to be.

Jade Emperor: Ox, you are second. Honest and patient, slow and steady, you carried even your rival across. The second year is yours.

Narrator 2: Next came the Tiger, dripping wet and panting hard. The current had pushed against him the whole way across.

Tiger: I swam... with all my might! That river fought me with every single wave. But a tiger never gives up!

Jade Emperor: Tiger, brave and powerful, you are third. The third year belongs to you.

Narrator 1: Then came the Rabbit, hopping up to the gate without a single wet ear.

Rabbit: I hopped from stone to stone, then floated across on a log. When the current tried to sweep me away, the Dragon blew me safely to shore!

Jade Emperor: Rabbit, quick and lucky, you are fourth. The fourth year is yours.

Narrator 2: A great shadow swept across the water. The mighty Dragon landed at the gate, scales shining.

Jade Emperor: Dragon! You have wings, you can fly. How are you only the fifth to arrive?

Dragon: On my way, I passed a village where the fields were dry and the people were thirsty. I stopped to make rain for them. Then I saw the Rabbit clinging to a log, so I blew it safely to shore.

Jade Emperor: Such a kind and generous heart. Dragon, you are fifth. The fifth year is yours.

Scene 5 — The Last Finishers

The palace gates, later. The remaining animals arrive in their turn.

Narrator 1: Suddenly the Horse came galloping up, mane flying. But something was coiled quietly around one of his hooves!

Snake: Ssssurprise! I hid by the Horse's foot the whole way across the river. He never even knew I was there.

Horse: A snake! Right by my hoof! Yikes!

Narrator 2: The Horse reared back in fright, and in that very moment the Snake slithered across the line ahead of him.

Jade Emperor: Snake, clever and quiet, you are sixth. Horse, swift and strong, you are seventh. The sixth and seventh years are yours.

Narrator 1: Then a small raft floated gently to the shore, carrying three friends who had crossed by working together.

Goat: We found a raft caught in the reeds!

Monkey: And I cleared away the weeds and pushed us off from the bank!

Rooster: And I spotted the raft first, with my sharp and shining eyes!

Jade Emperor: Teamwork wins the day! Goat, you are eighth. Monkey, you are ninth. Rooster, you are tenth. Well done, all three of you.

Narrator 2: Much later, the Dog came trotting up, shaking water from his fur and grinning from ear to ear.

Dog: Sorry I'm late! The water was just so perfect for splashing and swimming that I simply had to play a little.

Jade Emperor: Dog, loyal but playful, you are eleventh. The eleventh year is yours.

Narrator 1: Everyone waited. And waited. And waited some more. At long last, the Pig came wandering in with a happy, sleepy grin.

Pig: I got hungry on the way, so I stopped and ate a big, delicious meal. Then I felt sleepy, so I took a little nap under a tree. Did I miss anything important?

Jade Emperor: Pig, you are twelfth and last. The twelfth year is yours, and now the cycle is complete!

Scene 6 — The Cat Awakes

Back at the riverbank, then the palace. The Cat finally stirs and wakes.

Narrator 2: And so the twelve years were named, in the order the animals had arrived. But back near the riverbank, someone was just beginning to stir.

Cat: (yawning, stretching) Mmm, what a lovely sleep. Is it time for the race yet? Rat? Rat, where are you?

Narrator 1: The Cat looked around. The river was quiet. The other animals were long gone.

Cat: The race is over? But... Rat promised to wake me! He promised! Rat, how could you forget me?

Narrator 2: But the Rat was already far away at the palace, celebrating his first-place finish. He never came back for his friend.

Jade Emperor: Twelve animals, twelve years, turning round and round forever. Let the great cycle of the zodiac begin!

Narrator 1: From that day to this, the Cat never made it into the zodiac at all.

Narrator 2: And that, the old story says, is why cats still chase rats to this very day.

Narrator 1: Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Goat, Monkey, Rooster, Dog, and Pig. Twelve animals, twelve years, and the cycle that never ends.

Props & Costumes (Optional)

- A long strip of blue cloth or blue paper for the river (two students can gently wave the ends to make it ripple).
- Simple paper animal ears or masks on headbands, or paper signs each animal wears around the neck.
- A gold paper crown or yellow robe for the Jade Emperor.
- A small mat or folded blanket for the sleeping Cat.
- A cardboard 'raft' (a flat box or a sheet of brown paper) for the Goat, Monkey, and Rooster to carry on together.
- Optional: blue and silver streamers for two students to wave during the river-crossing scenes.

Director's Note

This is one of the best-loved Chinese folk tales, and it explains the order of all twelve zodiac animals. The heart of the story is the contrast between the Rat's cleverness and the Ox's kindness, so make sure the river-crossing scene gets room to breathe. Cast your two strongest readers as the narrators, since they carry the story between the action. There are no small parts here: even animals with only a line or two, like the Goat or the Dog, get a moment in the spotlight when the Jade Emperor names them. If your class is small, one narrator can do both narrator roles, and a few students can each play two animals that never appear at the same time.

Pronunciation Guide

生肖 *shēngxiào* — the Chinese zodiac (the twelve animal signs); say it like 'shung-shyaow'

玉皇大帝 *Yù Huáng Dà Dì* — the Jade Emperor, ruler of the heavens; 'yoo hwang da dee'

比赛 *bǐsài* — race or contest; 'bee-sigh'

河 *hé* — river; rhymes with 'huh' but with a rising tone

第一 *dì yī* — first (in order); 'dee ee'

鼠 *shǔ* — rat; 'shoo' with a dipping tone

牛 *niú* — ox; 'nyoh' with a rising tone

虎 *hǔ* — tiger; 'hoo' with a dipping tone

兔 *tù* — rabbit; 'too' with a falling tone

龙 *lóng* — dragon; 'loong' with a rising tone

蛇 *shé* — snake; 'shuh' with a rising tone

马 *mǎ* — horse; 'mah' with a dipping tone

羊 *yáng* — goat or sheep; 'yahng' with a rising tone

猴 *hóu* — monkey; 'hoh' with a rising tone

鸡 *jī* — rooster or chicken; 'jee' with a high flat tone

狗 *gǒu* — dog; 'goh' with a dipping tone

猪 *zhū* — pig; 'joo' with a high flat tone

猫 *māo* — cat; 'maow' with a high flat tone

Performance Tips

- Have each animal step forward and 'cross' the blue-cloth river as their turn comes, then freeze in place once the Jade Emperor names their order, so the line of finishers builds up across the stage.
- Encourage big contrasts in voice: the Ox slow and steady, the Snake hissing and sly, the Pig sleepy and cheerful, the Tiger loud and breathless from swimming.
- Give the Rat a sneaky, gleeful tone on the line 'every animal for himself,' then a quick physical leap off the Ox so the audience really feels the trick.
- Slow down for the Cat's waking at the very end. Let the silence sit for a beat before the Cat speaks so the disappointment lands.
- Practice the river-wavers and the raft-carriers separately a few times so the props move smoothly during the show.

After the Performance: Discussion Questions

1. How did the Rat win the race even though he was the smallest and slowest animal? Was that fair?

2. The Ox was kind and helped the Rat across the river. How did the Rat repay that kindness?
What would you have done if you were the Ox?
3. The Dragon could fly and probably should have won, but he stopped to make rain for a thirsty village and to help the Rabbit. Did the Dragon make a good choice? Why or why not?
4. Several animals, like the Goat, Monkey, and Rooster, crossed by working together. How is teamwork different from racing against each other?
5. Why do you think the story says the Cat chases the Rat to this very day? What lesson might that ending teach about keeping promises?