

# How to Use This Guide

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The resources here fall into two kinds. Background sources, from museums and encyclopedias, are written for adults and older students who want accurate context. Books and activities are sorted by the age of the reader, so you can move quickly from "what is this?" to "what do I hand a second grader?"

A word on framing. The Chinese zodiac is living cultural heritage tied to the Lunar New Year, one of the most widely celebrated holidays on earth. Present it as tradition and story, the way you would treat a folktale or a holiday custom, rather than as fortune-telling. The animal traits come from old legends, not from science, and they describe a tradition, not any real child in your room.

If you serve families who celebrate the Lunar New Year, this guide is a starting point, not the last word. Invite community members to share their own customs, and remember that traditions vary widely across China, across the diaspora, and across other cultures that keep a lunar new year of their own.

## Background Reading: Museums & Primary Sources

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Adult-level background from cultural institutions. Read these first to ground your own understanding before you teach, or assign excerpts to older students researching the topic.

### **The animals of the Chinese calendar**

National Museums Liverpool

A curator walks through all twelve zodiac animals using objects from the Lady Lever Art Gallery collection. Because it ties each animal to a real artwork, it is a strong model for a "look closely at one object" lesson. Pull a few of the images into a slideshow and ask students what details the artist chose to show.

### **Lunar Year and the Art of Chinese Cosmology**

Smith College Museum of Art

A short museum essay built around a Tang Dynasty bronze mirror that shows the twelve animals alongside cosmological symbols. It connects the zodiac to the wider Chinese view of time and the heavens, which is useful background for older students. Good for a high-school art or history class studying how belief shapes objects.

### **The Chinese Zodiac**

Lam Museum of Anthropology, Wake Forest University

A teacher-facing page that lays out the twelve-year cycle and the attributes tied to each sign in clear, classroom-ready language. It is concise enough to print as a one-page reference for a lesson. Use it to fact-check student work and to settle questions about which trait goes with which animal.

# Background Reading: Encyclopedias & Reference

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Authoritative reference articles for fact-checking, student research, and adult background. The Britannica Kids entry is the one to put directly in front of younger readers.

## Chinese zodiac

Encyclopaedia Britannica · Grades 6-adult

A vetted reference article on the twelve-animal cycle, its origin legend, and the traits linked to each sign. Use it as your authority when a student claim needs checking. It is dense for young readers, so excerpt it rather than assigning it whole below middle school.

## Chinese New Year

Encyclopaedia Britannica · Grades 6-adult

An overview of the fifteen-day festival, its history, its customs, and how it connects to the zodiac calendar. Helpful for a teacher who wants the holiday and the zodiac explained in one place. Pair it with a kids title for a layered reading assignment.

## Chinese calendar

Encyclopaedia Britannica · Grades 7-adult

This entry explains the lunisolar calendar that sits under the zodiac and the reason animal names attach to whole years. It answers the question students ask most often: why does the date move? Best for older students and for teachers who want the mechanics right.

## Chinese zodiac

Wikipedia · Grades 8-adult

A thorough, heavily cited survey of the zodiac scheme, its regional variations, and how it is used across cultures. Treat it as a jumping-off point and follow its footnotes to firmer sources. Useful for showing older students how to trace a claim back to a citation.

## Chinese New Year

Wikipedia · Grades 8-adult

A detailed entry on Spring Festival mythology, history, day-by-day customs, and how the holiday is observed around the world. The global-observance section is a good prompt for discussing how a tradition travels and changes. Send students to the cited sources for anything they plan to quote.

## Lunar New Year (for kids)

Britannica Kids · Grades 2-5

An age-appropriate explainer written for elementary readers, with the vocabulary kept simple. This is the reference to hand directly to younger students for independent reading. Use it as the shared text for a whole-class read before a craft or activity.

# Picture Books for Younger Readers (Ages 2-8)

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Read-aloud and early-reader titles, ordered roughly youngest to oldest. Each note suggests a way to use the book in class. Only confirmed, real titles are listed, with the ISBN-13 so you can order or catalog them directly.

### **Dragon Dance: A Chinese New Year Lift-the-Flap Book**

Joan Holub, illus. Benrei Huang (Puffin) · Ages 2-5 · ISBN 9780142400005

An interactive lift-the-flap book that introduces the sights and customs of the New Year for the youngest listeners. The flaps keep small hands busy and make it a strong choice for a toddler or preschool story time. After reading, let children name their favorite custom from the flaps.

### **Bringing In the New Year**

Grace Lin (Knopf) · Ages 3-7 · ISBN 9780375837456

A Chinese American family gets ready for the Lunar New Year, and the book ends with a fold-out dragon parade that children love to trace. It models the holiday through one family's eyes, which makes the customs concrete rather than abstract. A natural lead-in to a dragon craft or a discussion of how families prepare for holidays.

### **A New Year's Reunion**

Yu Li-Qiong, illus. Zhu Cheng-Liang (Candlewick Press) · Ages 4-8 · ISBN 9780763667481

A migrant construction worker comes home only once a year, and this quiet story follows the brief New Year reunion between him and his small daughter through rituals like hiding a lucky coin in a sticky-rice ball. It carries more emotional weight than most holiday picture books and touches on family separation, so preview it if that theme is sensitive for your group. Named one of the New York Times' ten best illustrated books of 2011; good for a read-aloud that opens a conversation about how families stay close across distance.

### **The Nian Monster**

Andrea Wang, illus. Alina Chau (Albert Whitman) · Ages 4-8 · ISBN 9780807556429

The Nian monster returns at New Year to devour a city, and a clever girl named Xingling outwits him using the holiday's own foods and firecrackers. It reframes familiar customs — red banners, loud noise, sticky rice cakes — as the very tools that defeat the monster, so the "why do we do this?" question answers itself. Pair it with a Great Race retelling to set two different New Year legends side by side.

### **Ruby's Chinese New Year**

Vickie Lee, illus. Joey Chou (Henry Holt) · Ages 4-8 · ISBN 9781250133380

A Red Riding Hood-style journey in which Ruby carries a gift to her grandmother and meets each of the twelve zodiac animals along the way. The animals appear one after another, so it doubles as a gentle introduction to the full zodiac cast without teaching the race legend. Back matter names the animals; use it as a warm-up before a sorting or matching activity. (Listed with ISBN only: the publisher page blocks automated checks, so no link is included.)

### **D Is for Dragon Dance**

Ying Chang Compestine, illus. YongSheng Xuan (Holiday House) · Ages 4-8 · ISBN 9780823418879

An alphabet-format picture book that walks through New Year traditions one letter at a time and closes with a dumpling recipe. The A-to-Z structure makes it easy to assign each student a letter to

illustrate. Use the recipe as a tie-in for a food or culture lesson.

### **The Year of the Horse: Tales from the Chinese Zodiac**

Oliver Chin, illus. Jennifer Wood (Immedium) · Ages 4-8 · ISBN 9781597021685

One entry in Oliver Chin's long-running Tales from the Chinese Zodiac series, which gives each animal a light adventure story; this is the Horse volume, timely for the 2026 Year of the Horse. The writing is simple and the plots run to a formula across the series, but the recurring cast and end-of-book zodiac notes make the twelve animals feel familiar. A serviceable current-year read-aloud; reach for the stronger single titles above when you want depth over timeliness.

### **The Great Race: The Story of the Chinese Zodiac**

Dawn Casey, illus. Anne Wilson (Barefoot Books) · Ages 4-10 · ISBN 9781846862021

A picture-book retelling of the race that set the order of the twelve animals. It is the cleanest way to introduce the legend before a sequencing or ordering activity. Read it aloud, then ask students to put the animals in finishing order from memory.

## **For Older Readers: Retellings & Chapter Books**

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Longer titles for upper-elementary and middle-grade readers. The first is a literary retelling of the Great Race; the other two are chapter books that grow out of the same folktale tradition and extend a zodiac unit into sustained fiction.

### **The Race for the Chinese Zodiac**

Gabrielle Wang, illus. Sally Rippin & Regine Abos (Candlewick Press) · Ages 6-10 · ISBN 9780763667788

A lyrical retelling of the Great Race with more detail and atmosphere than a simple picture book. The fuller language makes it a good model for students who are about to write their own legend. (Listed with ISBN only: no stable publisher information page could be confirmed for a link.)

### **The Year of the Dog**

Grace Lin (Little, Brown) · Ages 7-10 · ISBN 9780316060004

Grace Lin's autobiographical first novel follows Pacy, a Taiwanese American girl, through one Year of the Dog as she hunts for her talents and navigates two cultures. The zodiac year frames the story rather than driving it, but the New Year scenes and family customs make it a natural bridge from holiday picture books to chapter books. A good independent read for grades 2-5 and a mirror for students from immigrant families.

### **Where the Mountain Meets the Moon**

Grace Lin (Little, Brown) · Ages 8-12 · ISBN 9780316114271

A Newbery Honor novel in which a girl named Minli journeys to ask the Old Man of the Moon how to change her family's fortune, with Chinese folktales woven through the chapters. It is not about the zodiac directly, but it draws on the same well of Jade Dragon and Old-Man-of-the-Moon stories, so it carries a unit from the animal legends into a full novel. Best as a class read-aloud or independent read for grades 3-6.

# Free Activities & Lesson Plans

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Downloadable, classroom-ready materials from cultural institutions, free to use.

## Lunar New Year Zodiac Animals: Coloring Pages

Asian Art Museum, San Francisco · Pre-K to Grade 3

Free, printable coloring sheets that pair each zodiac animal with a short personality description. They work as a calm-down station, an early-finisher task, or a way to introduce the animals one at a time. Print a class set and let students color the animal for the current year.

## New Year's Celebrations: China

Asian Art Museum, San Francisco · Grades K-12

A free education resource covering Lunar New Year rituals, lucky symbols, and word play, with activities scaled across K-12. The word-play section is a fun bridge to a language-arts lesson on homophones and good wishes. Pick the activities that match your grade and skip the rest.

# Building a Zodiac Unit: A Planning Framework

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A satisfying unit moves from story to system to celebration. Open with the legend of the Great Race, because the story hooks students and quietly teaches the fixed order of the twelve animals. A picture-book read-aloud is the easiest entry point, followed by a sequencing activity that asks students to recover the finishing order on their own.

Once the order is in place, turn to the system behind it. Explain the twelve-year cycle and let students find their own animal by counting from a known year, which folds in real arithmetic. From there, introduce the Five Elements and the idea that an animal pairs with an element, so a person might be a Wood Tiger or a Water Rabbit. This is where the topic stops being a list of animals and becomes a calendar.

Close with the living holiday. Connect the zodiac to the Lunar New Year, the moment when each new animal year actually begins, and bring in a hands-on custom such as a paper-cutting craft or making a paper red envelope. Ending with celebration leaves students with the feeling of the tradition, not just its facts.

For assessment, skip the quiz and ask for something made. Have students write and illustrate their own short legend explaining a thirteenth animal, or build a labeled wheel of the twelve animals in order. Both show understanding and give you something for the hallway.

# Discussion Questions for Any Age

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These prompts work after a read-aloud or as journal starters, and they scale from a one-word answer to a full paragraph.

The Rat won the race by being clever rather than strong or fast. Was that fair? Why or why not?

Each animal in the legend shows one strong trait. Which animal's trait sounds most like you, and why?

The Cat was left out of the zodiac. How would the story feel different if the Cat had finished in time?

Many cultures keep a new year tied to the moon or the seasons. How is the Lunar New Year like a holiday your own family celebrates, and how is it different?

The traits in the zodiac come from old stories, not from science. Why might people enjoy a tradition like this even when they know it does not predict the future?