

Are You an Ox?

A discovery discussion for the Chinese New Year

Plan a discussion about Chinese New Year and the Year of the Ox. Learn about the history of the holiday and some of the customs. Use our discussion and related printables to engage participants in celebrating the Year of the Ox.

Props & Preparations

- Print copies of the [Who's Who on the Chinese Zodiac Calendar](#).
- Print copies of the [Zodiac Circle and Compatibility Chart](#) to use as a reference and to distribute to participants when presenting the “Understanding the Chinese Zodiac” portion of this activity.

Are You an Ox?

Introduction



The Chinese New Year for 2021—the Year of the Ox—starts on Friday, February 12, and begins the Spring Festival, which ends on February 22. Based on a lunar rather than solar calendar, the date of the Chinese New Year varies from year to year, but it always occurs between January 21 and February 21. The reason the date changes is because it begins at sundown on the day of the second new moon following the winter solstice (which occurs around December 21).

The Chinese New Year is celebrated by almost one-third of the world's population. People in China, Hong Kong, Macau, Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, North Korea, South Korea, Malaysia, Taiwan, Brunei, and Singapore, plus many in Western countries like the United States, Canada, England, Germany, and Australia will all mark the new year on February 12. Here's how to say “Happy New Year!” in Chinese:

新年快乐

Xīn

nián

kuài

lè!

Why is 2021 considered the Year of the Ox?

Understanding the Chinese Zodiac

Let's start with the handout [Who's Who on the Chinese Zodiac Calendar](#). It shows the years, the animals, and the characteristics associated with each of the signs. According to the Chinese zodiac, years are arranged in cycles of 12, and each cycle is named for an animal: rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig. People born in the year represented by a certain animal are thought to have the characteristics of that animal. Recent Ox years are 1925, 1937, 1949, 1961, 1973, 1985, 1997, and 2009. If you were born in one of these years, you are an Ox.

Chinese Sign	Birth Years												Chief Characteristics
Rat	1952	1924	1908	1940	1980	1972	1936	1928	2000	2008			Wily, crafty, charming, clever, cunning, generous, good friend, successful love, wealth, artistic talent, intelligent, ambitious, confident, quick thinking.
Ox	1951	1923	1907	1939	1979	1971	1935	1927	1999	2011			Steady, hardworking, practical, conservative, determined, persistent, patient, hardworking, reliable, honest, loyal, hardworking, serious.
Tiger	1950	1922	1906	1938	1978	1970	1934	1926	2006	2018			Self-assured, adventurous, energetic, charming, ambitious, courageous, dynamic, flexible, confident, sometimes rebellious, energetic, confident, like to go forward, difficult.
Rabbit	1953	1925	1909	1941	1981	1973	1937	1929	2001	2013			Quiet, elegant, friendly, soft-spoken, warm, compassionate, observant, flexible, peaceful, sometimes sensitive, persistent, honest, like to go forward, difficult.
Dragon	1954	1926	1910	1942	1982	1974	1938	1930	2002	2014			Energetic, assertive, confident, natural leader, ambitious, self-assured, like to go forward, difficult, confident.
Snake	1955	1927	1911	1943	1983	1975	1939	1931	2003	2015			Intuitive, charming, quiet, self-reliant, practical, sometimes sensitive, like to go forward, difficult, confident.
Horse	1956	1928	1912	1944	1984	1976	1940	1932	2004	2016			Energetic, self-reliant, good at making decisions, like to go forward, difficult, like to go forward, difficult.
Sheep	1957	1929	1913	1945	1985	1977	1941	1933	2005	2017			Quiet, calm, elegant, soft-spoken, sensitive, like to go forward, difficult, like to go forward, difficult.
Monkey	1958	1930	1914	1946	1986	1978	1942	1934	2006	2018			Witty, clever, energetic, confident, good at making decisions, like to go forward, difficult, like to go forward, difficult.
Rooster	1959	1931	1915	1947	1987	1979	1943	1935	2007	2019			Confident, energetic, hardworking, practical, like to go forward, difficult, like to go forward, difficult.
Dog	1960	1932	1916	1948	1988	1980	1944	1936	2008	2020			Intuitive, energetic, confident, good at making decisions, like to go forward, difficult, like to go forward, difficult.
Pig	1961	1933	1917	1949	1989	1981	1945	1937	2009	2021			Practical, hardworking, energetic, confident, like to go forward, difficult, like to go forward, difficult.

Ox years also follow their own 60-year cycle according to their relationship with the five essential elements: water, 1973; wood, 1985; fire, 1997; earth, 2009; and metal, 2021. This relationship to a particular element—metal in 2021—helps determine the personality and characteristics of those born in Ox years.

Discussion Starters

- Can you find your birth year on the calendar? What animal sign are you?
- Who would like to read each of the 12 signs and their corresponding characteristics aloud? (If nobody volunteers, you can do the reading and ask participants to raise their hands when you come to their animal sign.)
- Do you agree with the characteristics used to describe your sign? If not, why not?
- Is there another animal you think you are more similar to? Would you rather be another animal?

Zodiac Compatibility

Now, let's look at the [Zodiac Circle and Compatibility Chart](#). (You can have a lot of fun and a lively discussion with this information.)

Discussion Starters

- Based on the zodiac circle, was your husband or wife a good match for you?
- How about others close to you? According to the zodiac, are you compatible with them?
- Have your actual relationships with your husband or wife and others close to you proven the zodiac right or wrong as far as compatibility?
- How about people born under the sign determined not to be a good match for you—did you end up being compatible with them, or was the zodiac circle correct?



How did the Chinese zodiac come to be?

There are many fun stories about how the Chinese zodiac came to be. One that is particularly entertaining describes a race that the Jade Emperor invited all animals to attend. The first 12 animals that crossed a river would get to be in the zodiac. Their placement would be determined by the order in which they crossed.

On the day of the race, all the animals gathered at the side of the river. Rat knew that he would need help to get across. So he went to Ox and convinced him that with the Ox's strength and Rat's keen eyesight, they would be sure to win. So Rat hopped onto Ox's back, and they quickly made their way. Just before Ox reached shore, though, the Rat jumped off Ox's back onto the shore, thus becoming the first zodiac sign. Ox was second.

What Does It Mean to Be an Ox?

Oxen are loyal, honest, and sincere. They are restrained and tend to be low profile. They aren't the life of the party, nor do they seek attention. Still, they gain recognition for their hard work and accomplishments. They play by the rules, and they want everyone else to do so as well. They think logically and are good leaders.

Those born in the year of the Metal Ox may face early difficulties and may have little support from family and friends, but they persevere and find success later in life. Metal Oxen are especially hardworking and active. They are always busy at some task, and they are well liked by their friends.

Men born in an Ox year are dependable and ethical. They put their entire self into whatever they do. They are dedicated to their family, although they tend to act authoritarian and want family members to abide by their rules.

Women born in an Ox year are restrained and genial. However, they are stubborn, and will follow their own path no matter what. This sometimes leads to struggles. Despite their tendency to be obstinate, they are agile thinkers and movers.

Famous Oxen: Barack Obama; Margaret Thatcher, Charles Lindbergh, George Clooney, Dustin Hoffman, Walt Disney, Princess Diana, Robert F. Kennedy, Louis Armstrong, Meryl Streep, Malala Yousafzai, Hirohito, Gerald Ford, Paul Newman, Jack Nicholson, Jesse Owens, Morgan Freeman, B.B. King, Yogi Berra, Malcolm X, Ed Sullivan, Jim Carrey, Angela Lansbury, Johnny Carson

Lucky Numbers: 1, 4

Lucky Colors: blue, yellow, green

Lucky Flowers: lily of the valley, bamboo

Lucky Directions: southeast, east

Unlucky Numbers: 3, 6

Unlucky Colors: red, brown

How Much Do You Know About the Chinese New Year?

Have fun taking this quiz!

1. Why are there fireworks on Chinese New Year?

Answer: According to one legend, there once was a monster named Nian, who stalked around on New Year's Eve. Most people hid in their houses, but one boy was brave, and fought him off with firecrackers. The next day, all the people celebrated the demise of Nian by setting off more fireworks. **Fun fact:** More fireworks are set off around the world on Chinese New Year than any other day of the year.

2. Chinese people never give a sharp object such as a knife or scissors to family or friends as a New Year's gift. Do you know why?

Answer: Giving a sharp object is symbolic of "cutting off" your relationship with that person.

3. What is the reunion dinner?

Answer: It is a celebratory family dinner held on New Year's Eve and is considered the most important get-together of the year. Everyone is expected to come home on New Year's Eve. It is so important that single people are known to hire fake boyfriends and girlfriends to take home with them, because marrying and having children to carry on the family name is of the highest importance in Chinese culture.

4. What is a dragon dance? What does it mean?

Answer: This traditional dance is performed by a team of dancers who hold up a long figure of a dragon with poles. The dragon is a symbol of China and is believed to bring good luck, so the dragon dance brings good luck to the community. The longer the dragon formation, the greater the luck!

5. Should you shower on New Year's Day?

Answer: No! You should not shower, sweep, or empty the garbage, because you might wash, sweep, or throw away your good luck. However, there is a day before the Spring Festival dedicated to cleaning, so you can wash away all the bad luck and prepare for the good luck that is coming with the new year.

6. What do Walt Disney, Louis Armstrong, and Napoleon have in common?

Answer: They were all born in an Ox year.

7. What are red envelopes used for?

Answer: Red envelopes contain monetary gifts and are often given at New Year's. Red symbolizes good luck.

8. What is another name for Chinese New Year?

Answer: The Spring Festival

9. What course of the reunion dinner has special meaning?

Answer: Chinese New Year desserts are traditional and important, because many of the names have a secondary meaning. For example, *tangyuan* means “soup balls,” but it sounds like *tuanyuan*, which means “reunion,” so it is a popular dessert. Similarly, *fa gao*, a sponge cake muffin that is dyed bright colors, is similar to *fa cai*, which means “to get rich.” It is a very popular dessert!

10. Can you name the animals of the Chinese zodiac?

Answer: rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig

Predictions for the Year of the Ox 2021

The year of the Ox, which begins on February 12, will be a good year to focus on relationships, whether they be friendship or romance. These efforts will pay off with longevity and loyalty in these relationships.

In work and finance, it will be a year in which people must double their efforts in order to accomplish anything at all, and those who prosper will be those who make an extraordinary effort. There will be many obstacles to overcome, so it's important for people to focus on the concrete, on what is in front of them, and not get caught up in dreaming.

Discussion Starters

- Do you believe in astrology, which is the study of how the movement of the stars and planets or even the time of day that you were born influences your personality or life? Why or why not?
- Those born in 1925, 1937, 1949, 1961, 1973, 1985, 1997, and 2009 are Oxen. If you were born in an Ox year, do you have Ox characteristics? If you know someone who was born in an Ox year, do you think they do? Why or why not?
- What do you think of the Ox year predictions?

Red Envelopes to Celebrate the Chinese New Year

The Chinese New Year is celebrated with gifts given to family and friends, special symbolic foods, and of course, firecrackers. Most families hold a reunion dinner on New Year's Eve where relatives gather to renew family ties. Red envelopes or red packets filled with money are the usual New Year's gift given to children by their parents, grandparents, and close friends. Employers often give red envelope bonuses to their employees to show appreciation for a year of hard work. Chinese people associate the color red with energy, happiness, and good luck. Giving a gift of money wrapped in red assures the receiver of a year filled with happiness and prosperity. No one would ever give a New Year's gift of money in a white envelope—white is a color reserved for funerals and mourning and would surely bring bad luck.



Only new, crisp bills are put in the red envelopes. It's considered disrespectful to give old, worn bills, especially since the old bills could bring last year's bad luck with them. Gift envelopes are always given and received with both hands. This emphasizes the generosity of the giver and the gratitude of the receiver. If you're giving gifts to several people in a family, it's considered proper and respectful to give to the oldest person first—even if all are children.

Discussion Starters

- Most Chinese New Year traditions focus on ensuring good luck and good fortune in the coming year. What New Year's traditions do you practice so that you will have a year full of good luck?
- Do you have a lucky color, food, or number? Why do you think it's lucky? Share your good-luck story.
- Have you ever visited China? If you have, what did you enjoy most? If you'd like to go, what would you want to see and do?

Food for the Chinese New Year: Symbolic and Delicious

Family is the foundation of Chinese society, and therefore, it is considered very important that all family members be present for the New Year's Eve dinner. Even if a person can't be there, a place is set for them.

Lucky foods are served during the New Year festival so that the coming year will be filled with good fortune. A food is considered lucky based on the pronunciation of its name or its appearance. Fish, which sounds like *surplus* in Chinese, is an auspicious symbol. Eating fish—perhaps one on New Year's Eve and one on New Year's Day—will bring a surplus year after year.

Chinese dumplings stuffed full of good things are another popular New Year's treat. They should be fat with lots of pleated dough to ensure a bountiful year. Sometimes coins are hidden in the dumplings, and the one who gets a coin dumpling will become wealthy in the coming year.

Dumplings are arranged in lines on a plate, never in a circle. A circle of dumplings means that one's life will go in circles, and they will never get anywhere or achieve their goals. Legend has it that the more dumplings a person eats during the New Year's celebration, the more money they will make in the upcoming year.

Oranges and tangerines, because of their full, round shape and lucky golden color, are also popular at the New Year celebration. The Chinese word for *orange* sounds the same as the word for *success*, so these bright citrus fruits are considered lucky.

Discussion Starters

- Have you ever been to a Chinese New Year celebration or participated in one? Share your experience.
- In the United States, Chinese is one of the most popular ethnic cuisines. Do you like Chinese food? Have you ever eaten any of the symbolic New Year's foods? Share your experience.
- If you're Chinese, tell how you and your family celebrate the new year.

Additional Activities

1. Celebrate the Chinese New Year with a party featuring Chinese "lucky foods." Pass out red envelopes with gift cards or play money.
2. Watch a [Chinese New Year parade](#) or celebration.

Zodiac Circle and Compatibility Chart

Who Do You Love?

The three animals that are evenly spaced from one another around the circle are generally good matches.

1. Rat, Dragon, Monkey (pink sections)
2. Ox, Snake, Rooster (yellow sections)
3. Tiger, Horse, Dog (green sections)
4. Rabbit, Sheep, Pig (blue sections)

Who Don't You Love?

The animals opposite each other on the circle are generally poor matches:

1. Rat and Horse
2. Ox and Goat
3. Tiger and Monkey
4. Rabbit and Rooster
5. Dragon and Dog
6. Snake and Pig