MANDARIN ZEST
中文皮





VOCABULARY GUIDE

Chinese Zodiac Vocabulary



十二生肖

shí'èr shēngxiào · the twelve animals




The 12 animals, the words around them, how to ask someone's sign, and 8 animal idioms.



12	**zodiac animals** with years
14	**key words** and 6 sentences
8	**animal idioms** to impress







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PART 1

The 12 animals of the zodiac

Each year in the Chinese calendar belongs to one of 12 animals, always in this order. Your sign is the animal of the year you were born.

农历

The zodiac follows the lunar calendar (nónglì). A new animal starts at Chinese New Year, between late January and mid-February. If you were born in January or early February, check the date of Chinese New Year that year: you may belong to the previous animal.

01



鼠

shǔ

Rat

Everyday word: 老鼠 lǎoshǔ

1984 · 1996 · 2008 · 2020

02



牛

niú

Ox

Same word in everyday speech

1985 · 1997 · 2009 · 2021

03



虎

hǔ

Tiger

Everyday word: 老虎 lǎohǔ

1986 · 1998 · 2010 · 2022

04



兔

tù

Rabbit

Everyday word: 兔子 tùzi

1987 · 1999 · 2011 · 2023

05



龙

lóng

Dragon

Same word in everyday speech

1988 · 2000 · 2012 · 2024

06



蛇

shé

Snake

Same word in everyday speech

1989 · 2001 · 2013 · 2025

07



马

mǎ

Horse

Same word in everyday speech

1990 · 2002 · 2014 · 2026

08



羊

yáng

Goat

Same word in everyday speech

1991 · 2003 · 2015 · 2027

09



猴

hóu

Monkey

Everyday word: 猴子 hóuzi

1992 · 2004 · 2016 · 2028

10



鸡

jī

Rooster

Same word in everyday speech

1993 · 2005 · 2017 · 2029

11



狗

gǒu

Dog

Same word in everyday speech

1994 · 2006 · 2018 · 2030

12



猪

zhū

Pig

Same word in everyday speech

1995 · 2007 · 2019 · 2031

PART 2

Talking about the zodiac

Key words

☐	生肖	shēngxiào	Chinese zodiac, zodiac sign
☐	十二生肖	shí'èr shēngxiào	the twelve zodiac animals
☐	属	shǔ	to be born in the year of
☐	属相	shǔxiang	zodiac animal (spoken)
☐	本命年	běnmìngnián	your own zodiac year (every 12 years)
☐	农历	nónglì	lunar calendar
☐	春节	Chūn Jié	Spring Festival, Chinese New Year
☐	过年	guònián	to celebrate the New Year
☐	动物	dòngwù	animal
☐	性格	xìnggé	personality
☐	运气	yùnqi	luck
☐	吉祥	jíxiáng	auspicious, lucky
☐	红包	hóngbāo	red envelope (gift money)
☐	年	nián	year

Useful sentences

你属什么?
Nǐ shǔ shénme?
What's your zodiac sign?

我属龙。
Wǒ shǔ lóng.
I was born in the Year of the Dragon.

今年是什么年?
Jīnnián shì shénme nián?
Which animal is this year?

你是哪一年出生的?
Nǐ shì nǎ yì nián chūshēng de?
Which year were you born?

今年是我的本命年。
Jīnnián shì wǒ de běnmìngnián.
This year is my zodiac year.

龙年快乐!
Lóng nián kuàilè!
Happy Year of the Dragon! (swap in any animal)

GRAMMAR TIP

To give your sign, use 属 (shǔ) + animal: 我属龙, "I'm a Dragon". In conversation you'll also hear 我是属龙的, which means the same thing.

CULTURE NOTE: 本命年

Your 本命年 comes back every 12 years, when the year's animal matches your sign. Tradition says it can bring bad luck, so people wear something **red** (红色, hóngsè), like red socks or a red bracelet, to stay protected.

PART 3

Animal idioms (成语)

Zodiac animals show up in many four-character idioms. These eight are common in everyday Chinese.

马到成功
mǎdào chénggōng

Instant success

"Success as soon as the horse arrives." A classic good-luck wish.

龙马精神
lóngmǎ jīngshen

Full of energy

"The spirit of a dragon-horse." Often wished to elders at New Year.

虎头蛇尾
hǔtóu shéwěi

Strong start, weak finish

"Tiger head, snake tail."

画蛇添足
huàshé tiānzú

To overdo it

"Drawing legs on a snake": ruining something by adding too much.

对牛弹琴
duìniú tánqín

Wasted effort on the wrong audience

"Playing the lute to a cow."

守株待兔
shǒuzhū dàitù

Waiting for luck instead of working

"Guarding a tree stump, waiting for a rabbit."

亡羊补牢
wángyáng bǔláo

Better late than never

"Fixing the pen after losing a sheep."

鸡飞狗跳
jīfēi gǒutiào

Total chaos

"Chickens flying, dogs jumping."

YOUR TURN

我 _____ 年出生。 I was born in...

我属 _____ 。 My sign is...

我妈妈属 _____ 。 My mum's sign is...

QUICK QUIZ

1. 2024年是 _____ 年。
2. 2027年是 _____ 年。
3. 2030年是 _____ 年。

Answers: 龙 · 羊 · 狗

PRACTISE SPEAKING

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