

Celebrating the Chinese New Year on Stamps !

James H. Grayson

The Chinese New Year ! This Sunday, 22 January, a new year begins – the Year of the Rabbit ! Everyone has heard of the Chinese New Year and of the Zodiac animals which are associated with it. But, why isn't the Chinese New Year celebrated on the same day as we celebrate New Year ?

The Chinese calendar isn't like our Western calendar based upon the movements of the sun; it's a lunar calendar based upon the movements of the moon. Because the lunar calendar and our solar calendar don't match up, the lunar new year will occur sometime between the end of January and the end of February.

The Chinese lunar calendar is a cycle of twelve years. Five of these twelve-year cycles makes up a grand cycle of sixty years. Each year in the cycle is represented in succession by a different animal. In order these are the Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Sheep, Monkey, Rooster, Dog and Pig. As 2023 is the Year of the Rabbit, it is the fourth year in the current twelve-year cycle.

Each of the animals represents a different kind of personality or personal characteristic. The Rabbit is said to represent long life, a positive attitude to life, cleverness, and wittiness. Anyone born in this year (or the previous Rabbit Years 2011, 1999, 1987, etc.) will have these characteristics. Anyone considering marriage traditionally would consult a fortune teller to see if their birth year and the birth year of a prospective partner matched. Matching a Tiger with a Rabbit would NOT have been a good idea !

We call it the 'Chinese' New Year, but it isn't just Chinese. True, the calendar dates back hundreds of years before Christ to China, but this lunar calendar and its culture was shared throughout East Asia in China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam and in many Southeast Asian nations. It really is the East Asian New Year.

To celebrate the New Year, the nations of East Asia started to issue New Year stamps in the same way we issue stamps to celebrate Christmas. Japan was the first country to issue a New Year stamp in 1935, but it had no picture of an animal on it. After the Second World War, more countries began to issue New Year stamps - South Korea in 1957, the Republic of China (Taiwan) in 1968, and the People's Republic of China in 1980. Since then other countries with no connection with East Asia or its culture have joined in the celebrations !

Here are two examples of the Year of the Rabbit from the People's Republic of China (1999) and from South Korea from the same year.

