

HAPPY YEAR OF THE RAT

Why do the flags of most nations on earth display some heavenly symbol, such as a crescent moon, a star or even a whole constellation? Because people need transcendence, something “higher” than their daily routine. An unfeeling pragmatist might watch the heavens only to predict the changing seasons, but most people want to feel at home in the cosmos. With twelve (sometimes thirteen) new moons between one Spring thaw and the next, and with prominent Jupiter orbiting on a leisurely twelve-year cycle, the ancient Chinese were intrigued by the number twelve. Like their Mesopotamian contemporaries, they saw the stellar background to the paths of the sun, moon and planets as a band of animals, a zoo, or as the Greeks would later name it, the zodiac. Thus twelve consecutive years in the Chinese calendar are called the years of the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, ram, monkey, rooster, dog and pig. These twelve celestial signs combine with ten earth signs to form a sixty year cycle. A day is divided into twelve hours. In ancient times, there was no clear distinction between astronomy and astrology, so all kinds of correlation with a person’s character were posited. For instance, a rat wants to reach the top without hurting other people, does everything thoroughly, is successful and has great power of endurance, but is easily swayed by appearances and flattery, and is prone to lying.



Here is a Christian comment on all this: Ash Wednesday almost always falls a couple of days after Chinese New Year, since the date of the full moon determines Easter Sunday. When the priest blesses the Easter candle at the start of the Easter vigil, he says: “Jesus Christ, the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. All time belongs to him and all seasons. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen.”