

The story of the New Year Race

Many thousands of years ago – in fact more thousands than you could possibly count – the Jade Emperor was arranging the world in an orderly fashion so that he could keep track of what was going on and keep everything neat and tidy.



He was particularly pleased with the way that time worked, but had an irritating feeling that maybe he had missed something. As he walked around the Heavenly Peach Orchard one day – well actually it was several hundred years, but that was just like a day to him – he realised that what was needed was a way of tracking the passing of the years. He was quite happy with the seconds, minutes, hours, days and months, but the years just didn't feel right yet. They needed names, he suddenly

thought, not just numbers – that way they would be much easier to remember, and he could have a bit of fun making the names and what happened in those years fit together. But what to call them? As he thought about this, he watched two phoenixes playing in the sky above him, diving and swooping and chasing each other. "That's it", he thought, "I'll gather the animals and birds together and have a race. I can name the years after the order they finish. The first 12 I think, because that will make a nice number to remember."

Once he'd made this decision, he wasted no time in summoning all the birds and animals to take part in the Great Race; but when he saw the huge crowd that arrived, he realised that this might be a bit difficult and dangerous to arrange properly. He was a bit disappointed, because, being an Emperor, he liked things on a grand scale, but in the end decided that since he only wanted 12 winners he only needed 12 animals to decide which order the names should be in. Having decided this, he chose the animals that he thought humans were most familiar with – only when he came to count them, he realised he had been distracted by a particularly juicy peach he was munching on and had actually chosen 13! They were the Rooster, Dragon, Ox, Dog, Monkey, Rabbit, Tiger, Horse, Cat, Pig, Rat, Sheep and Snake. He lined them up at the gate of the Heavenly Peach Orchard, and described the course they had to race around. It started going up the mountain to the left of the orchard, made a big loop round and ended with them

crossing the river that flowed to the right of the orchard. The Emperor thought he would include lots of different types of countryside to give the different types of animals a chance, but to be honest, he hadn't thought this through too carefully. In fact, as you will see, it all turned out all right in the end, but not quite the way he imagined.

"*Yi, er, san, kaishi!*" the Emperor shouted and the animals set off, with the dragon well in the lead, as you might expect. As the animals disappeared up the mountain, the Emperor strolled across the river to wait for them. He took a large basket of peaches with him to keep him going, and just as he was finishing the 273rd he saw the Ox swimming across the river and hauling himself out onto the bank. "Well, well, well," he said to himself. "Who'd have thought it!" But imagine his surprise

A portrait of the Jade Emperor painted onto silk

