

The story of the New Year Race

when, just as the Ox had got his front hooves onto the bank, out from behind his ears jumped the Rat, who landed neatly on solid ground, and with a small squeak of triumph, raced across the finishing line. The Ox lumbered up next, grumbling and mumbling about how the Rat had tricked him into giving him a lift. One by one the other animals emerged from the river and crossed the line. Third was the Tiger, then the Rabbit, followed by the Dragon, the Snake, the Horse, the Sheep, the Monkey, the Rooster, the Dog and the Pig.

They all stood around for a while waiting, until at last the Cat appeared complaining bitterly that the Dog had cheated and pushed it off the log they floated across the river on. But as there were no rules for the race, except to finish as quickly as you could, no one really listened and eventually the Cat ran off still complaining and

promising to get even with the Dog. The Jade Emperor was very pleased with the result of the race, but was a bit puzzled by why some of the animals hadn't done as well as he had expected. When questioned, the Dragon, who could have won the race so easily, admitted that he had been distracted by several humans he had found in various sorts of trouble and had stopped to help them – that, after all, is what Chinese dragons do. The Dog said that the Cat had put up rather more of a fight than he had expected and he had stopped to lick all the scratches better, and eventually the Pig had to admit that he had stopped for several snacks and a light breakfast on the way.

All in all, however, the Jade Emperor said that they had each acted according to their nature, especially the tricky Rat and the greedy Pig, so he carefully recorded the result of the race. This was on a long yellow scroll which he hung at the gates of the Heavenly Peach Orchard. It is probably still there now. What is certain is that the Rat is still the first year of the Zodiac, the Pig the last and the Cat has still not forgiven the Dog.

Because this all happened so long ago, no one can be certain of the exact details of the race, and who did what to whom. All that we do know for sure is the order the animals finished in.

A Chinese dragon carving at a temple



A traditional Chinese garden