

Lunar Year of the Dog

The words “dog” and “canine” belong to the same family and, in Chinese, the characters that they represent have existed since remote times. According to “Shuowen Jiezi”, the most ancient work about the origins of the Chinese characters, the character “canine” refers to a big dog and the character “dog” refers to a smaller one. This distinction is disappearing in time. In many popular Chinese expressions, the character “canine” is associated with expressions of positive sentiment, despite being humble, like “serve like canine and horse” or the expression “canine son” (to refer to one’s own son to the third persons). The character “dog” is always associated with expressions and descriptions of negative sentiment, many a time linked to character defects, like “dog dependent on the strength of a man” (someone who takes advantage of the power of another person, just like a dog that barks when protected by its owner); “friend of fox and dog” (friend of bad influence or one who is not appropriate); “steal chicken and touch dog” (practice discreetly acts that are not very proper).

The dog comes in the 11th place in the sequence of the 12 animals in the Chinese zodiac, and corresponds to “xu”. It is also in the 11th place among the 12 “terrestrial branches”. In China, the 12 terrestrial branches are used to indicate the hours of the day, being the “hours of xu” (from 7 o’clock to 9 o’clock in the evening) which is also called “hours of dog”. Since they are nocturnal hours, with dark sky, the dog, like a guard, remains alert to safeguard the door and secure the house. Thus came the Chinese expression “guard dog at the door”.

In many ancient Chinese books, there are a lot of entries and references to contents and various meanings of dogs. According to “Shan Hai Jing” (classical of Mountains and of Seas), a popular Chinese classic which records the ancient world that describes deities, stories, animals, plants, among others, and following the “Fengsu Tongyi” (General Significance about Customs and Habits), the dog was considered a “god of wind”. “Han Shu” (Book of Han) recounts that during the reign of Gaoxin, in the days of the mystic rulers, Pan Hu, of human body and head of a dog, killed a hostile general of the king and was rewarded a woman. They went to Nanshan where they had 6 sons and 6 daughters, and the family continued to grow and multiply. Consequently, some minorities (Miao, She, Yao, Li, Tong, Zhuang, Wa) of the southwest of China are considered Pan Hu just like their ancestor and from there on the dog was respected as a founding godhead.

The dog was one of the first animals to be domesticated by man, and it is also that which has the closest relationship with human beings. As it has always been, man has understood that a domesticated dog can serve him and help in hunting, safeguarding the household, the properties, and pastures, and more so, the dog is an animal of estimation and with a beautiful

physical shape. The dog is a close companion and faithful to man. The dog is known for its loyalty, not betraying the owner in any situation. So much in China as in abroad, frequent and common are the beautiful stories and news of dogs that saved a life or vindicated its owner. In ancient China, in reference to “Soushen Ji” (In search of the Gods), a story tells about a dog named “black dragon” that, one day, in order to save and awaken its owner, who had fallen asleep in the bush, it embarked on a long journey to deliver water and to wet the bush. The owner awoke and was saved, but the faithful dog died of exhaustion beside him. In recent times, in one of the drastic earthquakes which ravaged Mexico (end of the decade of 1980), it was through the help of dogs in the rescue operations that many survivors were found among the rubbles. To commemorate these valiant acts, an evocative plaque was unveiled.

In 2018, the lunar year “Wuxu”, which is also the lunar year of the dog, is celebrated. The renowned German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche cited; “The world was conquered through the understanding of dogs; the world existed through the understanding of dogs”. This is an affirmation of great profundity about that which is worth pondering and reflecting upon in this year of the dog.

Author: Gong Gang
Translation: C&C - Translation Center, Ltd.