

Lunar Year of the Rat

The year 2020, also the Lunar Year of the *Gengzi* Rat, has a total of 384 days due to the leap month of April. Although the rat is the head of the Chinese zodiac signs, the zodiac animal has often been deemed as cunning and sneaky in daily life appearances, both at home and abroad. Chinese phrases like “timid as a rat,” “short-sighted with the vision of a rat,” “shifty-eyed and thievish-looking like a rat,” “fleeing like a rat with one’s face covered,” and “unpopular like a street-crossing rat shooed by everyone” are mostly derogatory. The famous “Shuo Shu” (big rat) of *Shijing* even metaphorically compared the greedy and deplorable slave owners and exploiters in ancient China to rats with characteristics of being ugly, sly, and fond of nibbling in secret. When mentioning rats, the poetry of later generations often depicted them as “rotten” and “starved.” Since rats always live in damp and dirty environments, they often become the communicators of infectious diseases. The “black deaths” that once swept across Europe had even made rats a “symbol of darkness.” In both Chinese and Western cultures, rats seem to have become the embodiment of evil.

So why did the widely despised rat become the head of the Chinese zodiac signs? One possible folklore explanation would be that rats were credited with breaking open the heavens for the universal creation, as described by the so-called phrase of “the heavens breaking with a rat bite.” At the Chinese zodiac hour of *Zi*, during which chaos of the heavens and the earth remained uncleared, only the rats were active at this time to bite open the heavens and the earth, causing the flow of air and producing the elements of *yin* and *yang*. As a result, rats became the god of *Zi* that separated the heavens from the earth, produced and nourished all things, and was given the magic powers of getting rid of the old to bring in the new, seeing off the *yin* and welcoming the *yang*, and warding off disasters and attracting good fortune. In addition, rats have strong fertility, high survival rate, and longevity, which are in line with the ancient people’s desire for reproduction of life, flourishing offspring, and rich blessings and longevity. In the folk art of China, paper-cuts and Lunar New Year paintings of themes like “The Wedding of a Mouse’s Daughter,” “The Wheat-eating Mouse,” “The Grape-eating Mouse,” “The Pumpkin-eating Mouse,” as well as the festivals of various localities, such as “The Wedding Day of a Mouse’s Daughter,” have all signified that human beings are blessed with incessant reproduction of abundant offspring. In these folk cultures, rats are often portrayed as naughty, cute, and charmingly naive.

Similarly, in modern western films and television culture, rats are also rendered as the protagonists of animation and films endowed with certain virtues, such as wisdom, humor, kindness, love, and courage. Created in 1928, Mickey Mouse is still the easy-going, optimistic, and witty cartoon character with a sense of justice that children adore. In *Tom and Jerry*, cats and rats are no longer distinct adversaries, but are more like a pair of happy frenemies. Jerry, the smart rat, is always capable of evading capture by Tom, who is cunning but a bit clumsy. In *Ratatouille*, Remy, a small rat living in the sewer, with his unparalleled sense of smell embraces the dream of becoming a five-star restaurant chef and works hard to eventually lead his rat clan to settle in the roof of the five-star restaurant, living a refined and elegant life. These lively and vivid characters have won the adoration of people all over the world. In both Chinese and foreign artistic creations, rats have once again been granted a positive portrayal.

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