Do you believe that your personality traits, your fortune, even your life are connected with an animal? Chinese does. It is Shēng xiào (Chinese: 生肖), better known in English as the Chinese Zodiac. According to the website “wikipedia”, Chinese Zodiac is a scheme that relates each year to an animal and its reputed attributes, according to a 12-year mathematical cycle and these 12 animals are Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Sheep, Monkey, Chicken, Dog, and Pig. Chinese people like to use it to reveal some amazing information about your character, lifestyle, and emotional makeup. As the Chinese say, “this is the animal that hides in your heart." “Chinesezodiac.com” website claims that, even though it is thousands of years old, the Chinese Zodiac is one of the most recognizable symbols associated with Chinese culture today. Next, I will introduce what’s Chinese Zodiac, including its origin, different animal signs’ meaning and its roles.

The Chinese zodiac is the oldest known horoscope system in the world. It begins with 2637 B.C., the year which the Emperor Huangdi黄帝 supposedly invented the Chinese calendar. As sometimes happens with historical developments, many versions of the origin of the Chinese Zodiac exist. It is very hard to determine which is true but these versions can answer the question why Chinese people choose animals to date the years and why are these animals. According to the website “wenhua.youth.cn”, Zhang Binlun张秉伦, a professor of University of Science and Technology of China who studies in Chinese traditional culture, regards Chinese zodiac originated from the adoration and veneration of animals during prehistoric times. There was a need by humans to rely on animals bearing a close livelihood with them (such as horse, goat, cow, dogs etc), or to have fear against animals that endanger humans (such as tiger, snakes). With this came forth a veneration and adoration for these animals. And with this belief, humans began to use them as symbols to record years and months.

However, in Chinese opinion, the origin of Chinese zodiac is connected with a very famous legend. I find the hearsay in the website “chineseculture.about.com”. The story began that long, long ago before we had calendars, the Chinese people did not know how to count the years and so they asked the God in Heaven for help. The God decided to hold a race through a forest and across a river on his birthday with all the animals as competitors and decreed that each of the first twelve would have a year named after it. The rat, who won the race, jumped onto the back of the ox and won by a nose. The tiger came third and the rabbit, which jumped across the river on the backs of the dragon, came fourth. The dragon, which was certainly the fastest but had to go to the east to make rain for the farmer, came fifth. The snake and the horse came next, followed by the sheep, the monkey and the chicken, who shared a trunk to cross the river. The dog came eleventh and finally the pig managed to make last place.

In the beginning, ancient Chinese people use animals just to date the years. In 500 B.C., these animals are given other meanings through a book named Yi Jing. Utilizing thousands years of practical observations, the book reveals the attributes, driving forces, and possibilities that your birth year offers you. According to Shelly Wu, author of Chinese Astrology Exploring the Eastern Zodiac, states that there are two faces that make up our personality. The first is xian tian先天, or our original inherent “temperament.” These are the spiritual attributes that we came into this life with—our personality from the beginning. The second is hou tian后天, or our acquired “character.” This is determined by our choices and conduct. Temperament is our inclinations, tendencies, and predisposition. Character is a collection of actual habits and behaviors—our actual disposition. Temperament plus character equals your personality. And Chinese zodiac emphasizes that a person born in a particular year embodies its animal's characteristics which figure out xian tian, or our original inherent “temperament.” However, if you want get the correct “temperament”, you must think about this person’s outer animal, inner animal, and secret animal. The Outer Animal is the animal assigned to all persons born within any given year. Like this---The inner animal is connected with a person’s birth month. Like this---The secret animal is with a person’s birth hour. Like this---- Each person has three animals assigned to them.

And different animal presents different characteristics. The rat is connected with intelligent and popular. The ox is methodical and conscientious. The tiger is courageous and charismatic. The rabbit is well mannered pacifist. The dragon is ambitious and has the quality of leadership. The snake has active mind and enjoys challenges. The horse is charming and to enjoy being the center of attention. The sheep creative and has easy-going nature. The monkey is imaginative and curious. The chicken is flamboyant and well-read. The dog is honorable and has strong senses of fair play. The pig is honest and has understanding nature.

Actually, each sign, or archetype, is a balanced mixture of positive and negative attributes. For example, the “china.mrdonn.org” web site states that the Tiger’s courage and bravery can also be manifest as haste, or action without forethought. The Rabbit’s good manners and refinement can also be expressed as timidity and detachment. The Dog’s watchfulness and loyalty can become hyper vigilance and possessiveness. Of course, we hope we only have the good ones.

If you think Chinese zodiac is useless knowledge, you will be wrong. In fact, Chinese people use it in all aspects of their life. Firstly, as you explore each sign, notice if you see similarities between people you know and try to guess their animal sign. After learning about these ancient personality archetypes, you may notice some interesting similarities to your friends and family; and quite possibly, you may never look at yourself the same way again. Secondly, Chinese zodiac also serves the practical purpose of figuring out a person’s age without having to ask directly and risk offending someone. Thirdly, Chinese people like to give their friends their animals’ zodiac gifts to wish them good luck & happiness.

In short, Chinese zodiac is a very important part of traditional Chinese culture. At first, for the adoration and veneration of animals, ancient Chinese people used animals to date the years. Then Yi Jing let it become a predictive science. It's about the fascinating characteristics and possibilities which your birth year has bestowed upon you, to help you define your character traits and fundamental nature. In the later 3000 years, Chinese people accept this theory and use it in their life, even affect their life styles. If you want to understand China, know Chinese culture, you should learn it. Maybe, next time, a Chinese will ask you, “What animal sign were you born under?”