

## The Chinese Zodiac and the Lunar Calendar

Before the Xinhai revolution (辛亥革命) of 1911 and the fall of the Qing dynasty, the last dynasty of imperial China, telling the time was done with the aid of a set of symbols known as the “heavenly stems and earthly branches (*Tiangan dizhi* (天干地支))”. There are ten heavenly stems and twelve earthly branches and used together they make a system that is used to count the years, months and days as well as the two hour periods known as *shi* (時) which divided the “24-hour-day” into twelve periods. In the West we are familiar with the system when counting the years of what is sometimes known as the Chinese zodiac. In the Chinese “lunar” calendar, each year is assigned one of Twelve Earthly Branches and is representative of an animal. The animals included in this 12 year cyclical calendar are as follows:

1. rat, 2. ox, 3. tiger, 4. rabbit, 5. dragon, 6. snake, 7. horse, 8. ram, 9. monkey, 10. cockerel, 11. dog and 12. pig. [these correspond to the second row in the chart below]

Each unit in a cycle whether it represents a year or a minute is assigned one “stem” and one “branch”. The “ten stems” and twelve branches” run concurrently so that every twelfth year is, for example, the year of the Rat, but it takes 60 years for the stems and branches to once again coincide as they are displaced by two places every twelve years. When they do coincide, after 60 cycles, one full cycle is completed. For this reason a 60<sup>th</sup> birthday is considered to be extremely significant in China.

The chart below shows the cycle of “heavenly stems and earthly branches (*Tiangan dizhi* (天干地支)). The ten heavenly stems in the first row and the twelve earthly branches are in the second. By the end of ten movements of the cycle, the heavenly stems have come to an end but the earthly branches still have two movements to go. It will take 60 movements of the cycle for the calendar return to the beginning.

甲 1	乙 2	丙 3	丁 4	戊 5	己 6	庚 7	辛 8	壬 9	癸 10	甲 1	乙 2
子 1	丑 2	寅 3	卯 4	辰 5	巳 6	午 7	未 8	申 9	酉 10	戌 11	亥 12