

The Lunar Calendar

Before the fall of the last imperial dynasty in 1911, time was told with the aid of a system known as the 'heavenly stems and earthly branches' (*tiangan dizhi* 天干地支). There are ten heavenly stems and twelve earthly branches. Used together, they make a system employed to count 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 Chinese 'lunar' calendar, each year is assigned to one of the twelve earthly branches and is represented by an animal. The animals included in this 12 year cyclical calendar are rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, ram, monkey, cockerel, dog and pig. (These correspond to the second row in the chart below.) 2009 is the Year of the Ox and 2010 the Year of the Tiger.

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, since there are less 'stems' than 'branches'. When they coincide again after 60 years one full cycle is completed. For this reason a 60th birthday is considered extremely auspicious in China.

The chart below shows the first twelve periods of the cycle of the heavenly stems and earthly branches. The ten heavenly stems are in the first row and the twelve earthly branches are in the second.

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

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