

WHY CAT IS NOT IN THE TWELVE-YEAR CYCLE

In the midst of regular life, when the New Year comes around each year, people always say, “Now, this year is wood-male-tiger. Next year is wood-female-hare,” or they ask, “My year-sign is sheep. What’s your year-sign?” Mouse, ox, tiger, hare, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, bird, dog, pig: these have become signs for calculating time in the old tradition—years, months, twenty-four hour periods. However, if you ask who actually determined the twelve-year cycle and when, there is a short story.

Once long ago, at the end of the year, god commanded all the animals, “You must come to offer me congratulations for the New Year on the morning of the first day of the first month. Beginning with whoever comes earliest, I will appoint each one the king of animals for the following year in succession.”

The creatures heard that and were very happy. Each one thought he must strive to be number one, and each waited for that day to arrive. However, inattentive Cat forgot on which auspicious day he was to go and offer god congratulations for the New Year. So the next day he went to Mouse’s place to ask. Mouse knew why Cat had come, and thought, “This is a good chance to reduce my competitors by one right now.” He deceitfully lied, “Oh, it’s like this. We have to go on the morning of the second day of the first month.” So Cat was a day late.

The thirtieth day of the month itself came about. The first of the month was at sunrise the next day. Old Ox, because of his slower pace, prepared to go earlier than the other animals, and he set out on the road before sunrise. Mouse spied in the pen where Ox slept and clearly saw everything that old Ox did. When old Ox began to go on his way, Mouse leapt and landed on Ox’s back. However, since Mouse was small and light, Ox did not know Mouse was on his back.

When they got to the palace, no one had yet appeared. Old Ox thought, “Good, good. It’s good I’ve come early in the morning. Now it’s certain I’ll be the first king.” In a little while the gate opened wide with a creak. Then Mouse jumped to the ground from Ox’s back and nimbly bowed before god. Ox, seeing that unbelievable deed, grew regretful and anxious. Realizing he had been unsuccessful, he called out, “Hey, wait for me! I carried you a long way, so don’t act shamelessly.” Ox chased after him, but failed to catch nimble Mouse.

So Mouse was first and Ox second. Eventually the other animals arrived one after the other in this order: Tiger, Hare, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Sheep, Monkey, Bird, Dog and Pig. They have remained by turn as king of animals for each year.

On the morning of the second day Cat also arrived at the palace. The sentry threatened him loudly, “Hmmp, you’re an animal who doesn’t know how to pace himself! Who said to come on the second day? You were supposed to come on the first, that’s all. Get out! Come back only after you’ve washed your face!”

Cat realized he was late by a day, and that all the other twelve animals had met on the first day. So he knew he would never have the fortune to be king.

After he went back, he burnt with anger at Mouse, and he swore an oath: “You, Mouse, are the most inferior of animal-kind, a thief among householders, and a bandit who ransoms the heads of others. From the time of our fathers and forefathers there has never been any enmity or blood-vengeance between us two. Why did you have to do me such an evil turn? From now on, if I see any of your children, I’ll eat it. If I see two, I’ll eat the pair. If I see three, I’ll eat mother and children!” And he leapt on the mouse.

From then until now, whenever a cat sees a mouse, he is sure to catch it and he continues to teach this sad lesson to his children as well. There is a deep bone-piercing dispute between Cat and Mouse, and no one has ever known how to mediate it. Whatever the case, they are still enemies in these times. Cat hopes that some time god will make him king as well, and that he will be put into the series of twelve animals too. But according to god’s orders, he washes his face well throughout the six watches of the day and night. No one knows whether he will ever be appointed king of animals at some time. Whatever the case, it seems he has still been unable to reign as king in our times.

—Bu bzhi, in *Qinghai Popular Literature* 4, 1986