

READER'S THEATER

"THE RACE FOR THE ZODIAC"

Characters

Narrator 1	Rat	Pig
Narrator 2	Tiger	Goat
Jade Emperor	Rooster	Cat
Horse	Dragon	Rabbit
Snake	Dog	Ox
	Monkey	

NARRATOR 1: Long, long ago, before hutongs, or narrow alleys, connected neighborhoods across Beijing, before the Shanghai Tower glittered over the HuangPu River, before the world's longest sea bridge connected Zhuhai to Hong Kong, there was a Jade Emperor, a new zodiac, and some hopeful animals. The Jade Emperor decided to name each year in the Zodiac after a different animal. But how could he choose which animal should come first?

JADE EMPEROR: Animals of China, gather round! I, the great Jade Emperor and ruler of all the gods in China, decree that we should create a Zodiac calendar to start each new lunar year. To honor China's precious wildlife, we shall name each year in the Zodiac after a different animal. Tomorrow morning, we shall have a Great Race to determine which animals will be represented, and in what order.

RAT: But Jade Emperor, how is that fair to the smaller animals? We deserve a chance, too!

JADE EMPEROR: True, Clever Rat. But you are cunning, and I am certain the smaller animals will figure out a way. (Jade Emperor points to a wide river) Tomorrow morning, we will gather at the bank of the great Yangtze River, the longest river in all of Asia. The first twelve animals to cross the river will become part of our zodiac. Each animal will rule the zodiac for one year of every twelve.

ALL ANIMALS: Hooray! Three cheers for the Jade Emperor!

NARRATOR 2: Early the next morning, the animals gathered on the banks of the Yangtze. The water looked swift and deep, and some of the animals looked worried.

RAT (to Cat): Cat, my dear neighbor and friend, you look terrified!

CAT (in an anxious tone): Rat, I don't mind the water so much, and I always love a good refreshing bath. But this water is deeper than I am tall. And it looks so cold! I don't think I will make it across.

RAT (whispering to Cat): Don't worry, my friend, for I am clever and already have a plan. (looks at OX) Do you see that lumbering ox over there? He is tall and wide, and I hear he is a great swimmer. We can jump on his back and ride across the river. We'll be safe and dry!



CAT (anxious again): But what if he won't let us ride?

RAT (whispering to Cat): Oy, Cat, you worry too much! That ox is as dumb as he is wide. He'll never know the difference. And even if he does discover us, I've heard he is always agreeable in all things.

CAT: Okay, then, let's go. I really do want to win a spot in the zodiac!

JADE EMPEROR (loudly, so all can hear): Animals, take your marks...get set...GO!

NARRATOR 1: So Cat and Rat scampered together over to Ox and hopped onto his back, just as he slipped into the water.



CAT: Ooh, this water is sooo deep. I sure hope we don't fall in.

RAT (pushes cat into the water): Oops!

CAT: *screams a cat scream*

RAT: Sorry, old friend, but I'm a rat, after all. This zodiac is mine!
(laughs maniacally)

NARRATOR 2: Just before Ox reached the other side of the river, Rat jumped off his back and crossed the finish line.

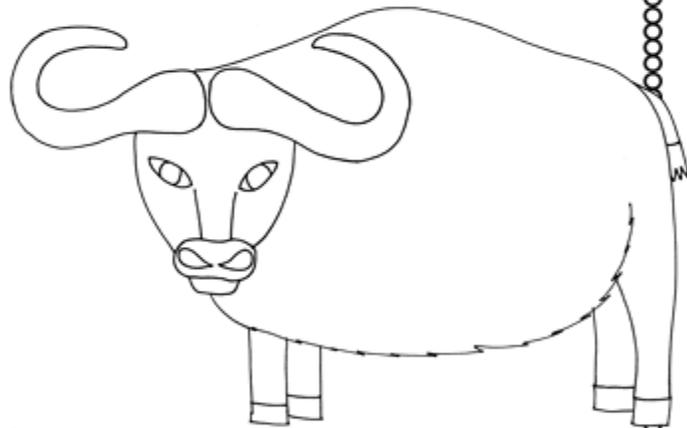
JADE EMPEROR: And in first place...RAT!

OX (slowly steps onto the river bank): How did Rat get here first? No matter, I don't really care.

JADE EMPEROR: In second place...OX!

OX: Phew, I'm tired! I'll just go have a nice rest under that pink cherry blossom tree. (yawns) Oh, look, here comes Tiger. (snores)

JADE EMPEROR: Third place...TIGER!



TIGER (slinking out of the water): That sneaky Rat...what a cheater. Ox and I are clearly the best swimmers among this group. And I saw what he did to my fellow feline. I will go sun myself up on that little hill and keep an eye on that scoundrel.

NARRATOR 1: Meanwhile, Rabbit was struggling to cross the river. She was fast on land, but her powerful hind legs mattered little in this cold, deep water. Waterlogged, coughing, and exhausted, Rabbit managed to grab onto an old log that was floating by. She was about to give up when a warm wind pushed at her back and nudged her right up onto the riverbank.

JADE EMPEROR: Fourth place...Rabbit!

RABBIT: I'm saved! It sure was lucky that the wind came along just then to push me ashore!

NARRATOR 2: It was a few minutes before the next animal crossed the finish line.

JADE EMPEROR: Fifth...Dragon!

DRAGON: Sorry, I'm late, Jade Emperor.



JADE EMPEROR, to DRAGON: What happened, Dragon? I expected you to come in first place, not fifth. You can fly from Yunnan to Hubei in no time at all. Crossing this river should be so easy for you!

DRAGON: You are right, Jade Emperor. But along the way, I saw some villagers battling a fire. I couldn't just leave them to deal with it alone. So I used my powerful breath to snuff out the flames. Then, as I approached the river, I saw Rabbit struggling

in the water. I feared she might drown, so I breathed a gentle wind to push her across the water and into fourth place. I really don't mind that she is fourth place and I am fifth.

JADE EMPEROR: You are very kind, Dragon. It's a shame some people in the world fear dragons and call them greedy monsters.

NARRATOR 1: Jade Emperor and Dragon watched as Horse approached the finish line. Just when it looked like Horse would be the sixth animal to cross, Snake uncoiled herself from where she had been hiding on Horse's leg.

HORSE (rears backward, startled): Argh! How did that sneaky Snake get on my leg?

JADE EMPEROR: Sixth place...SNAKE!

HORSE (shivers): I hate snakes! I can't believe I didn't even feel her curled up on my leg. And now, she's in sixth place instead of me.



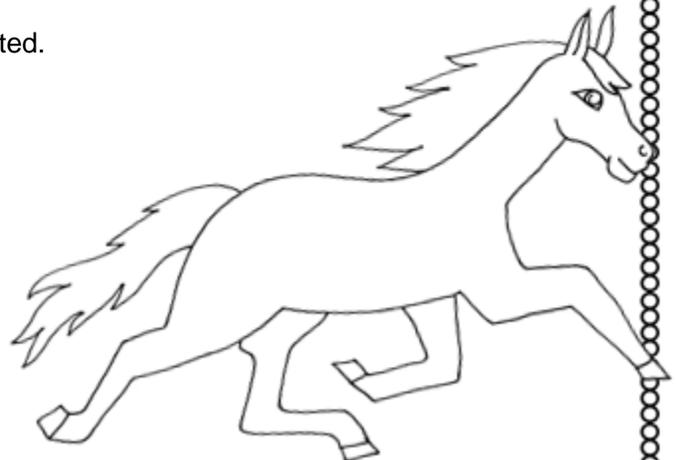
JADE EMPEROR: Seventh...Horse!

NARRATOR 1: Horse angrily tossed her mane at Snake and grunted.

SNAKE: Haha! I love being sssso sssneaky and sssso clever. I know no one likesss me, but who cares? I came in sssixth placce, didn't I? Sssixth placce!

JADE EMPEROR (looking into the distance): What...is...that?

NARRATOR 2: Upon hearing Jade Emperor's bewilderment, all the animals looked to the river to see a strange sight indeed. It looked like...some sort of raft? With three animals riding on it?





MONKEY: Goat, you were so lucky to find all these bamboo branches. Bamboo is the strongest of all the woods in the forest, and it will surely keep us safe as we cross the river. And you were smart by asking ME to help you pull down some strong vines to bind the bamboo together.

GOAT: (rolls eyes at Monkey) Sure, Monkey. We all know you are the smartypants.

ROOSTER: Well, don't you all forget that I, Rooster, also used my sharp beak and talons to cut the vines and bind the bamboo together for the raft. And I looked fine doing it, too. I can't have all this water frizzing up my feathers and making me look like a drowned cockatoo.



MONKEY: We're almost there! Why is everyone on the riverbank staring at us?

ROOSTER: Who will get off the raft first? Finish line order is important in this race.



GOAT: I found the bamboo! I should go first!

MONKEY: I climbed high into the trees to gather the vines! I should go first!

ROOSTER: Without me, neither of you would have been able to cut and secure those vines. Plus, I will look best crossing the finishing line before either of you.

NARRATOR 1: It was indeed a predicament. Goat, Monkey, and Rooster fell silent until Monkey, never one to stop talking for very long, said...

MONKEY: Building the raft was Goat's idea in the first place. And he did find the bamboo. I think Goat should go first.

ROOSTER: Agreed. And Monkey, I'm happy to let you go before me. I don't want to be in the middle. I like to make a grand entrance, you see, show off my fine feathers a bit. I'll just be ignored if I'm in the middle.

NARRATOR 2: So Goat, Monkey, and Rooster agreed on their order and stepped off their homemade raft.

JADE EMPEROR: Number eight...Goat! Number nine...Monkey! Number ten...Rooster! Nice raft, my friends!

MONKEY, GOAT, ROOSTER (all together): Thanks, Jade Emperor! We worked together to stay dry!

NARRATOR 1: As the ten animals who had already finished the race dried themselves in the warm sun, Jade Emperor began to wonder who the last two animals would be. No animal had crossed the finish line in quite some time. He strained his eyes and finally saw something bobbing in the water.

DOG (splashing around and having a fabulous time): Oh, but this water is divine! I haven't had a good swim since yesterday! I love the water! It's so splashy and cold and...splashy! I think I'll do some flips and water tricks! And look! There's some fish I can play with!



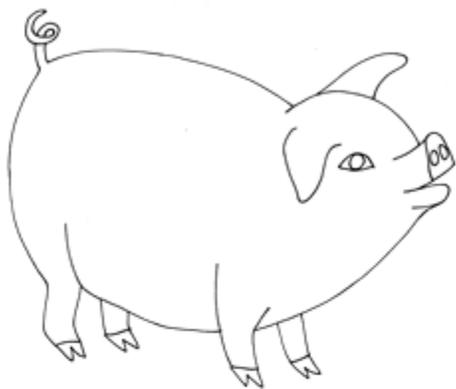
JADE EMPEROR (looking at the sun to check the time): Here comes Dog!

NARRATOR 2: Eventually, Dog splashed up on the riverbank, shaking his shaggy coat and spraying all the other animals—who were by now almost dry—with cold droplets of water and river mud.

ALL ANIMALS: Heyyyy! Dog! You are getting us all wet!

DOG: Sorry friends! I just love swimming!

JADE EMPEROR (holding hands up to protect his robes from Dog's water spray): Number eleven...Dog! And look! Here comes Pig!



PIG: That's a lot of animals there on the shore. I knew I shouldn't have stopped in that muddy spot on the side of the river. Oh, but the mud was so cool and refreshing! And then, I saw that rice and corn growing nearby, and I just could not resist having just a little more breakfast. And after breakfast, I always take a nice nap...

JADE EMPEROR: Number twelve...Pig!

PIG: To be honest, I'm shocked that I made it at all! Ooh! Is Monkey cooking some dumplings over there? Hey, Monkey!

JADE EMPEROR: Congratulations to you all! We now have our order for the Zodiac. Will each animal please step forward and put yourselves in Zodiac order when I call your names?

RAT
OX
TIGER
RABBIT
DRAGON
SNAKE
HORSE
GOAT
MONKEY
ROOSTER
DOG
PIG

RAT (points into the distance and scrunches nose in disgust): Well, well, well. Look who finally finished the race. Hello there, Cat!

NARRATOR 1: Everyone watched in shock as Cat finally dragged herself out of the river. Soaked and shivering, Cat walked over to Rat and says...

CAT: You'd better run, Rat! You are no friend of mine. I will never stop chasing you. From now on, cats will never be friends with rats. We cats will always chase mice. You will never be free of us. And have I mentioned how much I hate the water? Ugh!

NARRATOR 2: So from that day to this, the good people of China have celebrated the Lunar New Year and the new animal each year brings. It is even said that babies born in each year take on characteristics of their zodiac animals. Except, that is, for poor cat, who finished the race too late to be considered at all.

(everyone bows)

THE END