



Auspicious
Times

**THE CHINESE CALENDAR TALES:
NOTES FOR TEACHERS IN AUSTRALIA**



These teachers' notes are based on the children's illustrated book series *The Chinese Calendar Tales* by Sarah Brennan and Harry Harrison, published by *Auspicious Times Limited*.

Contents

Chinese Calendar Tales series overview

Author: Sarah Brennan

Illustrator: Harry Harrison

Australian Curriculum context and Teaching Suggestions

Suggested Activities

More Useful Websites

Chinese Calendar Tales series overview

China: the world's most populous country, and poised to become the world's largest economy, possibly as early as 2020. The old adage "Go West young man" is fast being replaced with "Go East young person" as the world stage shifts from West to East. It is clear that school children everywhere will be increasingly exposed to China in one way or the other in the future; many will find themselves heading for the powerhouse economies of China and India to seek employment and opportunities at the end of their education.

So an understanding of China, its very long and tumultuous history, its rich culture and its fascinating customs, is long overdue. Not to mention increasingly important for our school children, for whom China will be a major economic force for the rest of their lifetimes.

This has been officially recognized by the Australian Federal Government which has now made it compulsory for Grade 7 students to study either China or India in depth in History classes – <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/Year7>.

Of even more importance to primary schools are the ACARA requirements detailed at <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/CrossCurriculumPriorities/Asia-and-Australias-engagement-with-Asia> in which the study of Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia is one of the three cross-curriculum priorities for subjects including English and History.

The Chinese Calendar Tales is a growing series of funny and fabulous illustrated story books for children aged between 5 and 12, based on the animals of the Chinese Zodiac. The Chinese Calendar is over 2600 years old, and is widely observed in China, East Asia, and throughout the world by the Chinese Diaspora. It has 12 zodiac signs represented by 12 different animals, and each new Chinese Year is named after one of them. Since 2008, Hong Kong publisher *Auspicious Times Limited* has published a new Chinese Calendar Tale to celebrate that year's zodiac animal. Each story highlights different aspects of Chinese history, culture and tradition in a funny and child-friendly way, whilst the characters emulate the traditional characteristics of the animal they represent.

It is intended that by the end of the series, young readers will have gained an introduction to some of the major Chinese historical figures and events, many of its cultural and traditional practices and its extremely varied topography. *This feeds directly into the current Australian School Curriculum (see above).*

Author Sarah Brennan says: "*Chinese culture and history are fascinating, and not enough people know about them. Now with China so huge on the world stage, everyone wants to know about China...I believe that it's highly important forkids learning about China to be able to read bookswhich relate to Chinese culture and traditions in an appealing and accessible way.*" *Global Times, China, September 2011*

The stories are written in rhythmic rhyme, and deliberately use a rich and varied vocabulary in order to introduce children to new words in a context which is humorous and memorable. In the same way, the illustrations by Harry Harrison are very funny, with bold colours and careful attention to detail, including facial expressions, animal characteristics, and their Chinese setting. Each story has a twist in the tale that appeals to children who enjoy the element of surprise.

For this reason, the stories while following an illustrated picture book format are suitable for primary school students in both lower and upper primary school in different ways. Their humorous content and bold illustrations have proven equally popular amongst boys and girls, with a slight bias towards boys, which bucks current market trends.

With their strong rhythmic beat and rhyming pattern, these stories are also ideal for reluctant readers, slow readers and ESL students, who find the predictability of rhyme and rhythm confidence boosting and helpful in remembering new or difficult words.

Each story contains notes on the inner covers explaining the background to the Chinese Calendar, the historical or cultural context of the individual story, the characteristics of the zodiac animal in question and the years applicable to that particular zodiac sign. In addition, in each book Harry Harrison has drawn two funny subsidiary "characters" which appear on every page, telling their own "story" independent of the text which children can interpret in their own way.

The Author: Sarah Brennan



Sarah Brennan was born in Tasmania, Australia, and grew up on the slopes of Mount Wellington, surrounded by bush land, a menagerie of exotic animals and a creek complete with its own platypus. *“I began writing stories and poems when I was about seven and haven’t really stopped since, although ten years working as a medical lawyer in London did tend to get in the way! After moving to Hong Kong in 1998, I started writing a humorous column for a parenting magazine, then my first children’s story, A Dirty Story, was published in 2004. But the more Hong Kong schools I visited, the more I wanted to write books that were relevant to the kids I was meeting. That’s why I began writing the Chinese Calendar Tales.”* From www.sarah-brennan.com

Sarah has published 13 books to date, including nine Calendar Tales so far, a Year of the Horse Activity Book, two Dirty Stories and a humorous parenting advice manual entitled *Dummies for Mummies: What to Expect when You’re Least Expecting*. She lives in Hong Kong with her French husband, two daughters and an opinionated cocker spaniel.

The Illustrator: Harry Harrison



Harry Harrison is probably best known for his daily cartoons in the SCMP, which have appeared since 2001. He is the principal cartoonist for the paper, his work appearing six days a week. Harry collaborates with Sarah Brennan on children's books. His most prominent works include a series on Chinese zodiac animals such as Oswald Ox, Run Run Rat and Temujin the Tiger. He is also the illustrator of the 'Dirty Story' series. His works have appeared in a variety of journals such as *The Guardian*, *Time* magazine, *Asia Wall Street Journal*, *International Finance Review*, and *Far Eastern Economic Review*.

Harry has won many awards for his work including top Editorial Cartooning recognition at the Society of Publishers in Asia Editorial Awards 2012 and

special prize for a body of work at the Hong Kong 14th Human Rights Press Awards.

He lives with his wife, son and daughter and a restlessly senile cat on Lamma Island in Hong Kong.

Curriculum context and teaching suggestions

With their unique content, these books are suitable for use as learning tools in a variety of curriculum subjects, including History, Geography, English, Religious Education, Art and Design, and PDHPE and of course LOTE where Chinese is offered on the curriculum.

HISTORY:

1. From *Cross-Cultural Curriculum: Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia*

<http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/CrossCurriculumPriorities/Asia-and-Australias-engagement-with-Asia>

In the Australian Curriculum: History, the priority of Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia provides rich and engaging content and contexts for developing students' historical knowledge, understanding and skills.

The Australian Curriculum: History enables students to develop an understanding of histories of the diverse peoples of Asia and their contributions to the region and the world, and an appreciation of the importance of the region for Australia and the world. This happens as students learn about the importance of the traditions, beliefs and celebrations of peoples from the Asia region and through the study of ancient societies, trade, conflicts, progressive movements and migration to Australia by people from Asia.

2. The Australian School Curriculum for Grade 7 Primary School children requires students to study either China or India in depth. See notes at <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/Year7>.

Extract from the Australian Government website as follows:

“China

1. *The physical features of China (such as the Yellow River) and how they influenced the civilisation that developed there* ([ACDSEH005](#))
2. *Roles of key groups in Chinese society in this period (such as kings, emperors, scholars, craftsmen, women), including the influence of law and religion.* ([ACDSEH041](#))
3. *The significant beliefs, values and practices of Chinese society, with a particular emphasis on ONE of the following areas: everyday life, warfare, or death and funerary customs* ([ACDSEH042](#))

4. *Contacts and conflicts within and/or with other societies, resulting in developments such as the expansion of trade, the rise of Imperial China (including its material remains), and the spread of philosophies and beliefs [\(ACDSEH043\)](#)*
5. *The role of a significant individual in [ancient](#) Chinese history such as Confucius or Qin Shi Huang [\(ACDSEH132\)](#)”*

The Chinese Calendar Tales fulfill all of these requirements. Chinese geography in the stories to date includes major cities such as Beijing, Xian (formerly the ancient capital Chang ‘An), China’s vast farmlands, the Yangtse River, the South China Sea, the Silk Road and the northern border area. Chinese cultural icons to date include the Forbidden City, the Great Wall of China, the Terracotta Warriors, the Ice Festival at Harbin, the famous menagerie of Kublai Khan, the Birds Nest Stadium in Beijing and the Heavenly Winged Horse of the Ferghana Valley. Key groups in Chinese society in the Tales to date include the emperors Genghis Khan, Qin Shi Huang, Han Wudi and China’s only female Emperor Wu Zetian; the Mongols and raiding tribes including the Xong Niu, and the hill tribes. Significant beliefs outlined in the stories to date include the Chinese lunar calendar and Chinese Zodiac and key Chinese folk tales such as the legends of Lord Buddha’s Race, the Rabbit in the Moon and Lady White Snake.

These stories are a great introduction to understanding the relative age of Chinese civilization at a time when western civilization was still young, as well as the links between western and Chinese civilizations throughout history eg the Silk Route; the Mongol Empire.

Children can research and create a timeline showing what was happening in the West at the times represented in the stories. At the same time, they can gain an understanding of some of the significant people, events, inventions and places in China today and in the distant past, looking at religious, cultural and technological perspectives.

GEOGRAPHY:

Through a study of the series as a whole, children can become familiar with the vast size, location and extremely varied topography of the world’s most populous nation, which is already one of the world’s superpowers and is set to dominate the world’s economy by 2020.

ENGLISH:

1. From *Cross-Cultural Curriculum: Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia*

<http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/CrossCurriculumPriorities/Asia-and-Australias-engagement-with-Asia>

In the Australian Curriculum: English, the priority of Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia provides rich and engaging contexts for developing students' abilities in listening, speaking, reading, viewing and writing.

The Australian Curriculum: English enables students to explore and appreciate the diverse range of traditional and contemporary texts from **and about the peoples and countries of Asia**, including texts written by Australians of Asian heritage. It enables students to understand how Australian culture and the English language have been influenced by the many Asian languages used in Australian homes, classrooms and communities.

In this learning area, students draw on knowledge of the Asia region, including literature, to influence and enhance their own creative pursuits. They develop communication skills that reflect cultural awareness and intercultural understanding.

These books and teachers' notes are ideally-suited to work units involving Asian myths and legends, folk tales and poetry.

In Literacy:

The books contain strong characters, funny plots and exotic physical settings as well as fascinating Chinese and broader Asian historical and cultural settings, all of which can be discussed in class. "In jokes" or allusions in the text and illustrations to idioms or other legends can be explored and new or "difficult" vocabulary identified and explained before, during and after the text is read.

In speaking and listening: The stories are ideal for read-aloud activities due to their strong rhythm and rhyming pattern:-

- Individuals or small groups can read aloud successive verses in the story or take on roles within the story structure, including personification of not just the human and animal characters but also natural phenomena such as trees, floods and storms;
- They can be encouraged to call out the predicted ending of second lines based on the rhythm and rhyme of its predecessor;
- They can predict what happens next;;
- Or explain the "twist in the tale" to their classmates.

Writing: The Tales are textbook examples of classic ballads. Through recitation and repetition, students can become familiar with rules relating to rhyme and rhythm, using these as the basis for writing their own stories in rhyme.

Drama activities: With their large cast of animals and human characters with colourful and exotic personalities, the stories are perfect for adaptation into short plays. Children can script and perform directly from the text or using the story as the basis for their own adaptation.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION:

The Tales are based on the Chinese Calendar, which has been incorporated into Buddhism in China and East Asia for over a thousand years. They are a fun and accessible way to learn about Buddha and some

key stories and traditions associated with Buddhism e.g. the Lord Buddha's Race which determined the order of the animals in the Zodiac, and Chinese New Year.

ART AND DESIGN:

Chinese New Year is the colourful event which heralds the arrival of the next Zodiac animal for the year. With objects ranging from the simplest (red and gold streamers, banners, "firecrackers", *lai see* (lucky money) envelopes and "gold coins") to the more challenging (Chinese kites, painted paper lanterns and long paper lions or dragons for a fabulous Lion or Dragon dance), Chinese New Year and The Chinese Calendar Tales are natural candidates for art room and design projects.

PDHPE:

The animals of the Chinese Zodiac, as presented in the Chinese Calendar Tales, run the gamut of strengths and weaknesses of character in people everywhere, with each sign enjoying both positive and negative traits. This makes them an ideal subject for discussion of good and bad behaviour towards others. Dragons, for example, are famously full of fun and energy. They are sensitive, brave and soft-hearted, and make wonderful friends, but they can also be short-tempered and very stubborn. Oxen, on the other hand, are patient, honest and hard-working, and tend to be creatures of habit. They are highly intelligent, but they don't care what others think and are often very quiet and reserved. Rams are shy, and hate confrontation, but they are very lucky and always land on their feet.

LOTE:

Where Chinese or Mandarin is offered in the school curriculum, these Tales are a perfect way to enhance language learning with a light-hearted introduction to the culture and history behind the language.

Suggested Activities

A Chinese New Year/Spring Festival event

What better way to enliven the return to school in February than with a colourful and exciting event to celebrate the new Chinese Year?

February also heralds the arrival of the next *Chinese Calendar Tale!*

Suggestions:

- Have an exciting Chinese New Year Author Visit! Author Sarah Brennan goes on international tour every Chinese New Year to visit bookshops and schools with her latest Chinese Calendar Tale, as well as conducting

writing and reading workshops for primary school children, teachers and parents. See the School Visits page at www.sarah-brennan.com for further details. Sarah can be booked directly at sarah@auspicioustimes.com and is available throughout the year.

- Have your students make their own paper lion or dragon for an in-class Lion or Dragon Dance to welcome the new Zodiac beast for the year: see http://www.activityvillage.co.uk/chinese_lion_dance_costume.htm; <http://www.kidsgamesandcrafts.com/Chinese-New-Year-Crafts-4.html>

Alternatively, local Chinese lion or dragon dance troupes are surprisingly easy to find over the internet, and not expensive to hire. Organize a school assembly with a lion or dragon dance to start the Chinese New Year with a bang! See suggested websites below for links.

- Make a fabulous *Chinese Calendar Tale* book display in the Library or classroom, and have special classroom readings of the new Chinese Calendar Tale for the year;
- Rehearse and hold a Play in a Day based on the newest *Chinese Calendar Tale*;
- Hold a Chinese costume day, with the children wearing Chinese style pyjamas or cheongsams. Give a prize in Assembly for the best costumes in each class or grade;
- For older children, hold a fashion parade featuring fashions during the different Chinese dynasties and have the children act as compères for the event, relating something about the history of each dynasty;
- Decorate corridors and rooms with Chinese lanterns and cherry blossom; create Buddhist “shrines” with offerings of oranges, incense sticks and red-and-black banners;
- Make a wall display featuring the Zodiac Animal for the new Chinese Year in the centre, surrounded by the other Animals in the order they appear in the Chinese Zodiac;
- Make puppets of the different zodiac animals;
- Make Chinese kites and fly them in the playground!

See <http://www.activityvillage.co.uk> or <http://crafts.kaboose.com> for dozens of Chinese design ideas and craft activities.

A Recreation of the Lord Buddha’s Race (a.k.a. The Great Race)

Ancient Chinese legend has it that the Lord Buddha invited all the animals to a great feast. The animals were told that the order in which they arrived would be the order they would appear in the Zodiac. Just before the end of the race, the animals had to cross a great river. This is what happened:

The Rat – cunningly asked the Ox, who was coming first, if he would carry him to safety. The Ox kindly obliged, and just as they neared the other side of the river, the Rat jumped over the Ox's shoulders and so came first in the Race;

The Ox – therefore came second;

The Tiger – strong as he was, he was forced to swim against the tide, and arrived third, panting and puffing;

The Rabbit – nimbly hopped across the river on boulders and so arrived fourth;

The Dragon – should have won, as he was flying. But he stopped to make rain for some human beings, and was therefore delayed and came fifth;

The Snake - curled up inside the Horse's hoof, so that just as the Horse arrived, she was able to slip out and beat the Horse to sixth place;

The Horse - therefore came seventh;

The Ram, Monkey and Rooster – made a raft and sailed it across the river, arriving in the same order, hence:

The Ram – came eighth;

The Monkey – came ninth;

The Rooster – came tenth;

The Dog – stopped to play in the river, so came eleventh;

The Pig – got hungry and ate dinner, so came twelfth and last!

The possibilities for a wonderful play or an obstacle race are obvious and even better if the participants all dress in appropriate animal costumes!

The 2012 title, *The Tale of Pin Yin Panda*, includes a retelling of this famous legend and is perfect as the basis for an introductory study of the Chinese Zodiac.

A Zodiac Animal Day

Another fabulous excuse for a costume day at any time of the year, with students all coming dressed as their animal in the Zodiac calendar. Find out what Year each child belongs to at www.sarahbrennanblog.wordpress.com. This is a great day to discuss the characteristics of the various animals; whether the children think they apply to them; what they can do about any of the negative traits they might own up to (see Curriculum Context: PDHPE above). Fortunately, every Zodiac animal has many valuable traits, so everyone can be a winner!

NB for children born in January or February, extra care should be taken to determine their animal grouping. The date of Chinese New Year (when the year of the new animal begins and the old ends) is determined by when the new moon rose in that lunar cycle in that particular year. The following website can be used by teachers to determine the correct zodiac sign for these children but note that dating website advertisements on the site make it unsuitable for children to visit themselves:

<http://www.chinesezodiac.com/calculator.php>.

Mid-Autumn Festival Celebration

The Mid-Autumn Festival is a colourful and exotic alternative to Halloween, but without its dubious cast of characters from the Dark Side! In China, it's held on the 15th day of the eighth month in the Chinese Calendar (lunar calendar) which falls anywhere from mid-September to early October in the year, close to the autumnal equinox. It's the Chinese equivalent of a harvest festival, with beautiful baskets of fruit and vegetables on display. Lanterns are made and displayed in many fantastic forms, and special sweet cakes called "moon cakes" are eaten.

Suggestions:

- It's another time for a Dragon Dance – book a professional troupe, or have the children make their own Dragon. See Chinese New Year suggestions above.
- Make moon cakes as a special cooking activity in class. While traditionally moon cakes are made from lotus seed paste, with a salted duck egg yolk representing the moon, a far more child-friendly, sweet version can be found at: http://www.dltk-holidays.com/china/easy_chinese_mooncakes.htm
- Fortune cookies are also a fun way to celebrate mid-Autumn Festival – see <http://kids.creativity-portal.com/d/projects/food/fortune-cookie-recipe.shtml> for an easy child-friendly recipe.
- This is the time for making lanterns in an amazing array of shapes and colours. Your own zodiac animal could be the theme; or autumn vegetables; or the moon itself. Hang these in rows in corridors or in the classroom or assembly halls for a festive display;
- Make displays of healthy seasonal fruits and vegetables in baskets in class to celebrate the best of local produce;

- Tell the amazing stories of Mid-Autumn Festival and the Moon: the tale of the Emperor Houyi and his beautiful wife Chang'e; the Legend of the Jade Rabbit or The Tale of Lady White Snake: <http://www.gz2010.cn/09/1002/17/5KKS3DLU007801PJ.html>
- Rehearse and hold a Play in a Day of either The Tale of Oswald Ox or The Tale of Rhonda Rabbit – both perfect stories for the Mid-Autumn Festival!

Similar events can be held for other key Chinese Festivals such as the Dragon Boat Festival in June.

More Useful Websites

Chinese festivals generally:

<http://www.chinahighlights.com/festivals/>

<http://www.china-family-adventure.com/chinese-festivals.html>

<http://www.edunetconnect.com/categories/originals/chinafest/chineseef.html>

Chinese lion and dragon dances:

General: http://www.hellokids.com/c_19721/read/holidays/chinese-new-year/chinese-dragon-dance;

http://www.hellokids.com/c_19722/read/holidays/chinese-new-year/chinese-lion-dance

Professional lion and dragon dance troupes:

In Melbourne:

<http://www.hongdelion.com.au/en/Home.aspx>

<http://www.cysm.org/lion.html>

<http://www.qianlidao.com.au/dragon-dance/>

In Sydney:

<http://sydneyliondance.com.au/>

<http://www.cyl.org.au/lion.html>

http://taoistkungfu.org/?page_id=89

In Brisbane:

<http://www.lamtuluankungfu.com/>

<http://www.sunnybank.info/arts/dance/liondance/index.htm>

<http://tomlo.com/kungfutaichi/liondance/index.htm>

In Canberra:

<http://www.canberraliondance.com/pmld-friends>

In Adelaide:

<http://www.grandmasterleong.com.au/dances.php>

In Perth:

<http://www.lion-dance.com.au/>

<http://www.chungwah.org.au/lion.php>

In Hobart:

Try <http://www.jingangdhyaincnet.org/ecrindex.html>

In Darwin:

<http://www.chungwahnt.asn.au/index.php?page=lion-dancing>

Chinese history for children:

<http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/china/>

http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/song/readings/inventions_timeline.htm

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