



What the Rat Told Me: A Legend of the Chinese Zodiac Mini-Unit Plan

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Meet the Designers:

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Mini-Unit created July, 2017

This mini-unit was developed at the Doors to the World 2017 Summer Institute sponsored by the Five College Center for East Asian Studies and funded by the Freeman Foundation.

Introducing the Mini-Unit:

This unit was designed for children in K- 5 classrooms where students with special needs present in higher numbers than in typical classrooms. The unit will be taught with an awareness of the multi-levels of learners that exists in every class.

Student Goals:

- * Students will be able to recognize the genre of folklore and with prompting and support, retell familiar stories, including key details.
- * Students will identify characters, settings, and major events in a story.
- * Students will compare and contrast similar stories and develop a group reconstruction.
- * Students will collaborate and converse with partners to develop ideas and to express their own ideas clearly.
- * Students will write or draw a summative narrative to develop imagined experiences.

Contextualizing the Picture Book:

Title: *What the Rat Told Me: A Legend of the Chinese Zodiac*

Author: Marie Sellier

Illustrators: Catherine Louis, Wang Fei

Publisher: First published in France in 2008 by Philippe Picquier; it was later published in the US by NorthSouth (2009) and in China (2014)

ISBN 10: 0735822204 / **ISBN 13:** 9780735822207

Media: Calligraphy, linoleum block print

Genre: Folktale

Geographical Region: China

Summary:

Translated from French, the book *What the Rat Told Me* is a retelling of a folktale about the creation of the Chinese Zodiac. This is a story of a trickster—the rat—and how each animal was chosen for the zodiac. As the Emperor, ruler of Heaven and Earth, invites all the animals to visit him before sunrise at the top of Jade Mountain, the clever rat devises a plan—he tricks the cat into sleeping late with a promise to wake her up in the morning. The rat cleverly ignores his promise, and hops on the ox to ride up Jade Mountain to be the first to reach the emperor. Each animal that arrives at the mountain top is rewarded with a year for all time. Since the cat remained asleep, she has been left out of the Chinese calendar. And this, the reader is informed, is why the cat and the rat are not friends.

The illustrators used bold colors of black, white, and red, in calligraphy and linoleum prints, to tell the story. The back matter includes the Chinese calendar, a zodiac wheel, and a glossary of characters written in Chinese, linoleum block print, and English.

About the author and illustrators:

Author **Marie Sellier** was born in 1953 and authors books for children. Her book, *What the Rat Told Me*, was first published in France in 2008. It was later published in the USA, Great Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand in 2009, and in China in 2014.

Sellier is a graduate of the Paris Institute of Political Studies. Before focusing on writing and publishing her first collection, *Enfance De l'Art*, she was a journalist. Throughout her career she has pursued an interest in working with modern artists, and has written documentary films on painters and sculptors.

Illustrator **Catherine Louise** lives in Switzerland and produced the red and black linoleum prints for *What the Rat Told Me*. She is an author as well as an illustrator.

Wang Fei grew up in China where he learned Chinese calligraphy. Wang Fei produced the calligraphy for the zodiac symbols in *What the Rat Told Me*.

Analyzing the Picture Book

This analysis is written presuming Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) will be used to work with the book, utilizing the Whole Book Approach.

Three key questions typify VTS:

- * What is happening in the book?
- * What leads you to say this?
- * What else do you see?

For teachers needing to stick more closely to formative/summative lessons and assessments as well as district requirements for activating prior knowledge, variations on these questions in KWL format could include:

- * What do I think I know?
- * What do I wonder?
- * What knowledge is confirmed and misconceptions addressed?
- * What have I learned?

Using the Whole Book Approach, reading with the children instead of to the children, the reader considers the jacket of the book, front matter, the title page, orientation of the book (shape and framing), end papers, gutter (double and single spreads), spine, typography, design, and perspective. Sellier's descriptive vocabulary allow the animals to display their pleasure by wiggles, a whip of their tail, a yelp, or cries of joy. These words can easily lead a class into a discussion, or acting out of their feelings. Sellier also enriches her story with positive descriptions of each of the animals as they approach the emperor to receive their designated zodiac placement. The emperor bestows on the animals empowering titles or qualities. The animals are humble, sincere, have a spirit of adventure, are faithful guardians, or tireless protectors. These are powerful words to offer child readers.

Using Visual Thinking Strategies with students, the first characteristics that are notable about *What the Rat Told Me* are the shape of the book and vibrant color of the cover page. The illustrators effectively use their craft to make the reader take note of the main character of the book, printed in black in contrast to the white and red background. As you follow the tail of the rat to the back of the book, you see the cat, much smaller in size. The end papers reflect the textured red that is found throughout the book. While most of the animals are represented in black, there are a few that are portrayed in red and some in a combination of red and black.

The illustrators also play with the placement of the characters on each page. For example, on the first full page spread the rat is creeping from the gutter onto the recto page, half hidden in the gutter. He appears to be peering up at his Chinese character. This, on a predominantly white page, gives the reader a sense that the story is about to begin. Paired with the text on the page, "This story is true, I am sure, because I heard it from the rat, who was there," ensures that the reader will be eager to hear more.

The gutter is effectively used throughout the book, with some of the characters taking up full page spreads to impart size. Others slither up from the bottom of the page, as the snake does. The monkey dangles in from the top of the page in a teasing manner. Perhaps most engaging is the pig, whose back end precedes its head on facing pages. At the end of the book, as the rat is leaving the page, the cat is lurking behind with a paw almost touching the rat's tail. This gives the reader the idea that the story may not be over quite yet! The reader can also observe the change in the size of the rat

throughout the pages.

Each spread contains a red block printed Chinese character. A resemblance can sometimes be seen between the animal and its corresponding character. In addition, the author has provided the reader with informational back matter which includes a zodiac calendar and a list of animals, both depicting the corresponding block print and written Chinese character for each animal name.

Learning Experiences Analysis Reference

Lambert, Megan Dowd. *Reading Picture Books with Children: How to Shake Up Storytime and Get Kids Talking about What They See*. Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge, 2015. Print.

Connecting Picture Book to Family, Community and Current Events/People:

This book is ideally suited for use in the classroom around the time Chinese New Year is being celebrated. Depending on the year, this falls between the end of January and the first week of February.

A strategy to connect family and the classroom could include sending home some of the texts listed in this mini-unit, and request that parents or family members create a shareable audio recording of themselves reading the text. This is possible using the record function on any smartphone device or by using an application like SoundCloud. Extend the reading lesson by allowing students to listen to these recordings in small groups or if technology is limited, playing them for the whole group.

If your parent community includes families who celebrate Chinese New Year at home, ask a parent to come in and read (mystery reader-style) and perhaps encourage them to bring in some foods or red envelopes that are typical of a New Year celebration. Choose a book about Chinese New Year in this case, to introduce juxtaposing texts for comparison purposes.

A resource to use with younger children:

Happy New Year song with English translation, <https://youtu.be/Em18WSVguWw>

A resource to use with older children:

Various ways to say Happy New Year in context are...

Family member:

奶奶, 新年快乐! (nǎi nǎi, xīn nián kuài lè)

“Grandma, Happy New Year!”

Authority figure:

王老板, 新年好。 (wáng lǎo bǎn, xīn nián hǎo)

“Mr. Wong, Happy New Year.”

Friend:

小南, 新年快乐! (xiǎo nán, xīn nián kuài lè)

“Nan, Happy New Year.”

Juxtaposing Texts:

Juxtaposition is a literary device used in many texts. To teach younger children about this device it helps to explain what it means.

Pre-lesson

Choose a set of juxtaposed images.

Give to students and tell them that each of the paired images is an example of juxtaposition. Ask them, “What does juxtaposition mean?” Pair and share to discuss this with each other. (For older children, supply the following sentence prompt: *The juxtaposition of [...] and [...] makes us think about/ see/ feel/ consider...*)

Individually ask students to write down a word which describes the impact of using juxtaposition on a Post It note you have supplied. Place the Post Its on the whiteboard or on large paper. Discuss as a group what they think the word means.

Picture books to use for juxtaposing texts:

Story of the Chinese Zodiac = Shi Er Sheng Xiao De Gu Shi by Monica Change, Arthur Lee, and Rick Charette

Dumpling Soup by Jama Kim Rattigan

The Cat's Tale: Why the Years Are Named for Animals by Doris Orgel, illustrated by Meilo So

The Race for the Chinese Zodiac by Gabrielle Wang, illustrated by Sally Rippin

Learning Experiences:

Learning Experience Design #1

Analyze text using the Whole Book Approach

(See **Analyzing the Picture Book** section.)

With younger readers, once their base knowledge of vocabulary for the Whole Book Approach is acquired, explore the use of the gutter. The illustrators have playfully placed the animals on full page spreads, half page layouts, and coming out of the gutter. The children will be delighted by the pig pages where the back end precedes the front.

Explore vocabulary describing animals, sounds, and characters

Sellier enriches her story with positive descriptions of each of the animals as they approach the emperor to receive their designated zodiac placement. The emperor bestows on the animals empowering titles or qualities. The animals are humble, sincere, have a spirit of adventure, are faithful guardians, or tireless protectors.

For younger learners the questions can be modified to explore the sound and movement of the

animals by using some of the vocabulary connected with each character. For example: the tiger is charming, sensitive, and all-powerful. The dog is a protector who yelps his gratitude.

Guiding questions:

- * What sound does that animal make?
- * How does it move?
- * How does it make you feel?

For older learners: Building your own word bank. Using this resource with older students is an opportunity to focus on how the author effectively uses vocabulary to describe twelve different characters in one book.

Using writing journals and a copy of the book either at the desk or projected, have the students identify descriptive pairs of adjectives Sellier uses for each animal. Some examples include lively and cunning (rat), courageous and forceful (ox), supple and swift (rabbit), guardian and protector (dog), peaceful and good humor (pig). Once the majority of the pairs or descriptors are identified, have the children pair and share why these words aptly describe the character of the animal. Explain that this is a good way to build a word bank for writing when developing a character for a narrative.

Learning Experience Design #2: Readers Theatre

Students are invited to perform this short Readers Theatre. Have younger children work with mentor groups of older children. The younger students can carry signs with drawings and Chinese characters indicating their roles while the older students narrate. Groups of older students can costume and set the stage props themselves.

Stop the Zodiac – I Want to Get Off!

Characters:

Narrator
Pig (zhu)
Cat (mao)
Rat (lǎo shu)
Dog
Jade Emperor

Scene:

Zodiac Wheel, base of Jade Mountain, China. Pig calls a meeting of the Zodiac and its famous non-member Cat, who currently lives in Japan.

Narrator: This story takes place on the Zodiac Wheel, located at the base of Jade Mountain. It is the eve of Chinese New Year and the festivities begin later that day. Member Pig has called a meeting of all twelve animals and the unfortunate Cat who was left off all those years ago. The meeting is the first time in over 2000 years that the animals have met as members of the Zodiac. When not busy with their Chinese horoscope duties, the animals are kept busy being pets, pests, hunting, pulling ploughs, or slithering around jungle trees, to name but a few of their important jobs. Cat has flown in from Japan for the occasion.

Pig: Well thanks for coming today, esteemed colleagues and Cat. I know how difficult it is for some of you to be in the same space together after the whole race thing a couple of thousand years ago.

[Cat smiles a false, tight smile at Pig, but holds his tongue.

Rat stays on the Zodiac Wheel, not willing to come off and be anywhere near his arch enemy, Cat.]

Pig: Friends I have an important announcement to make. I am officially retiring as twelfth member of the Zodiac. I feel that my twilight years will be better spent on my ancestral farm at the bottom of Jade Mountain. I am getting old and my wife misses me during day. We can only be a proper pig family at night these days.

[There is a soft murmur from the other members of the Zodiac, as they look at each other in surprise at this announcement.]

Rat: Honorable Zhu, I am the first to acknowledge your years of unselfish service to the Zodiac. But, I must remind you that our esteemed Emperor is the only one who decides who stays and leaves and in what order that occurs. [Smiles smugly.]

Pig: Quite so, my friend Lao shu. The Emperor and I met this morning. [Gasps from the Zodiac animals and Pig puts out a trotter to calm them.] I wanted him to be the first to know of my retirement plans. He was sad to hear my news but understands my need to be with my family and grandpigs at this time. In fact, it was he who suggested we contact Cat to see if he would be interested in replacing me. After all, he missed his place on the Zodiac by a whisker. [He snorts and laughs at his own joke.]

[Rat starts to hyperventilate and Dog hands him a paper bag to help things. Dog is not entirely calm herself, sweat beads start to form on her hairline as she ponders the proposal.]

Dog: Dearest Zhu, I will be sorry to see you go. [Stretching a peace paw out to Cat.] Mao, it is time to work things out. If you take Jade Emperor's proposal, we will be a new team on the Zodiac. If we can get along in a domestic home, we can surely be friends of the Zodiac too.

Cat [smiling a Cheshire grin]: Of course, Loyal Dog. This is an opportunity of a lifetime. We can set the record straight with humans for once and show them just how well we can get along, share the same food and bed, and maybe you Dog can teach me how to go for a walk on a leash.

[Rat's head pops out of the paper bag as he hears Cat and Dog pledging peace to each other.]

Rat: Comrade Mao, I hear you live in a beautiful skyscraper penthouse in Tokyo these days. How will you find time to be number 12 on the Zodiac without giving up that lifestyle and relocating to Jade Mountain?

Narrator: Cat, with a sense of déjà vu, moves to silence Rat, who once before, ousted him from the Exclusive Zodiac Club.

Cat: I joined that race many years ago determined to serve Jade Emperor. If I remember it was you who encouraged me to sleep in. My turn has finally come. [He turns to pig]: I am honored and

accept. [They shake paws and trotters.]

Rat [realizing he will lose this contest]: Of course, Mao, my friend, who am I to get in the way of your turn ever. Your happiness is very important to me. Welcome to the Zodiac.

[Loud music or rumbling as Jade Emperor appears.]

Jade Emperor: My loyal and dedicated subjects, I am pleased you have come to an agreement together. Let us put old enemies and squabbles behind us. Welcome to the new Zodiac, we will announce the new order at the opening of New Year festivities tonight. Come pose for a group picture! We need to put the details out on Instagram and Facebook as soon as possible.

[The Zodiac animals gather in a wheel or circle while Pig takes the photograph.]

Summative Learning Experience:

Let's rewrite the ending: A child-initiated collaboration of storytelling

After reading *What the Rat Told Me* and completing the learning experiences, students are familiar enough with the details to be able to rewrite the story. Younger children could draw pictures and dictate their story to a teacher. Older children could rewrite the story from the perspective of another character.

Pre-lesson discussion

Gather students for a whole group mini-lesson. On chart paper record and, where necessary, paraphrase their suggestions. Ask questions like, "How could we make this story different?" "What else could happen?" and for older children, "What would happen if another character told the story?"

Display story ideas on chart papers around the room. Have children do a gallery walk with their journals to collect ideas that they want to use in their story from the communally shared ideas on the chart papers.

Lesson

Dedicate classroom writing time for the rewrite activity, either in one lesson period or as a 20-minute segment over three or four days for older children. For younger children, suggest that they rewrite or narrate the ending only and perhaps allow time for an illustration. Older students may want to write a complete story, using the original plot, but developing their own ending.

In one-to-one environments, students can type their stories and add illustrations.

Present back to the whole group:

- * Younger learners can be lead through a "readers theatre" via a narrative approach, having each child pick a character and make a prop. A consistent, repetitive phrase such as "I did it!" or a sign can be used to support second language learners, or children with special needs.
- * A group retelling with children picking any animal they want, can also be supported with pictures from magazines or the internet.

Creating Additional Multimodal and Interdisciplinary Opportunities:

The book *What the Rat Told Me* offers an opportunity to explore Chinese characters. The twelve members of the Zodiac are listed at the end of the publication, each one with the corresponding English name for the animal. It is possible to copy the symbols and enlarge the size, or source the image on a website.

For younger children: Cut out each symbol and place at the easel or art table in the classroom for children to practice copying the symbols. Materials include: white paper, and black paint and paintbrushes or black markers. In addition to using this book during the Chinese New Year, this unit could also be used when working with themes associated with color, animals, and calligraphy.

For older children: Research two versions of New Year messages and have students copy the lettering as a banner, as a greeting card for their family, or just to practice the symbols.

新年好！(xīn nián hǎo)
Have a good New Year!

新年快乐！(xīn nián kuài lè)
Have a Happy New Year!

Standards:

Reading - Key Ideas and Details:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.3

Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Craft and Structure:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.4

Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.9

Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Writing—Text Types and Purposes:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

Production and Distribution of Writing:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.4

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

**Speaking and Listening—Comprehension and Collaboration:
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.1**

Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.2

Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.6

Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

Learning Experience References

- * Louis, Catherine, and Shi Bo. *My Little Book of Chinese Words*. New York: NorthSouth, 2008. Print.
- * Orgel, Doris, and Meilo So. *The Cat's Tale: Why the Years Are Named for Animals*. New York: Roaring Brook, 2008. Print.
- * Wang, Gabrielle, and Sally Rippin. *The Race for the Chinese Zodiac*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick, 2013. Print.

Summative Learning Experience References

- * Orgel, Doris, and Meilo So. *The Cat's Tale: Why the Years Are Named for Animals*. New York: Roaring Brook, 2008. Print.
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