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After a year of anxiety, what can we expect from the Year of the Ox in 2021?

Few people will have been sorry to see the end of 2020, a year characterized by the global COVID-19 pandemic. For those who follow the Chinese new year, the close of the tragic and tumultuous Year of the Rat is fast approaching, too.

Feb. 12 marks the beginning of the Year of the Ox. The second animal of the Chinese zodiac, the ox denotes the hard work, positivity and honesty that will be manifested in all of us in the coming 12 months, according to astrologers.

Jupiter Lai, a Hong-Kong based Chinese and Western astrologer, says the ox is “grounded, loyal, gentle and trustworthy.”

Following the Chinese calendar, which rotates in 60-year cycles based on 12 earthly branches, each represented by an animal year, and five element years — wood, fire, earth, metal and water — 2021 is the Year of the Metal Ox. On a deeper level, each earthly branch is characterized by a yin or yang force and an element.

In the Year of the Rat, the force was the fast, hard, active yang while the element was water, which Lai says is known for “changing all the time.” The ox’s earthly branch, meanwhile, is associated with yin, which is slow, soft and passive. Its element is earth, representing “stability and nourishment. It is believed these additional associations and the characteristics of the ox have great synergy and are mostly favorable.



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And the ox's good attributes are not only found in the Chinese zodiac. The animal has been represented in religion, art, literature and popular culture throughout east Asia for centuries. Much of the high regard it holds is due to its importance in agriculture.

In China, it is considered an animal of strength that is associated with harvests and fertility. In years gone by, people created an ox using mud and beat it with sticks as part of a new year ritual to mark the start of spring. It was also believed that placing a metal statue of an ox at the bottom of a river could prevent a flood. The ancient Chinese art of feng shui, which harmonizes people with their environment using energy forces, also regards the animal as auspicious, which has given the ox a reputation for granting wishes.

The ox is one of the most common animals featured in Korean proverbs. The imagery is overwhelmingly positive, portraying the animal with traits such as diligence, gratitude and loyalty. It is seen as altruistic as it serves mankind.

One example is “It is a bad plowman that quarrels with his ox,” which is akin to the French proverb “Bad workmen will never find a good tool,” whose use dates from the 13th century, and the later English version, “A bad workman blames his tools.”

As peasant families in ancient times are understood to have often sold their ox to pay for their son’s education, the ox is also presented as an object of great value — “those who steal a pin will steal an ox.”



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Sylvain Jolivald, an author specializing in Japanese history and legends, says one of the foremost events related to oxen in Japan is the *ushi matsuri* (cow festival) held annually on Oct. 12 at Korui-ji, said to be the oldest temple in Kyoto. The ritual involves a priest donning a white costume and white mask to embody the god Matarajin and riding around the temple on a black cow. The priest then dismounts and climbs onto a wooden platform from which he addresses the gods.

“He reads (the message) to the gods over and over to ask them to grant peace and an abundant harvest, and to scatter away bad illnesses,” Jolivald says.

The meaning of the ox in Chinese astrology even influenced the construction of temples in Japan in ancient times due to the links between Chinese astrology and Buddhism.

According to Jeffrey Kotyk, a researcher of foreign astrology in medieval east Asia at the University of British Columbia, each earthly branch of the Chinese zodiac is connected to a time of day and a direction. The ox’s time is 1 a.m. to 3 a.m., while its direction is northeast.

During these hours, it is believed that “even plants doze” and “ghosts and goblins appear to scare men away,” Jolivald says. He surmises that the awakening of the spirits in the hours of the ox is linked to the fact that the direction of the ox is called the “Gate of Demons.”

In Chinese astrology, the northeast (the cardinal direction shared by the ox and the tiger) is “considered the origin of bad influences,” Jolivald says. It is for this reason, he adds, that temples were built to the northeast of Japan’s capitals, to protect them from harm. Nara was protected by Todai-ji temple, while Kamakura was guarded by Egara-tenjin shrine. Kyoto had Enryaku-ji temple, while Tokyo had Kanei-ji temple.

The connections between the animals, spirits and directions even resulted in the *oni* trolls of Japanese folklore to feature the horns of the ox and the skin of the tiger in their loincloth in a nod to the ox and the tiger, he says.



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Japan's indigenous religion, Shintoism, also venerates and respects the ox. The animal is associated with Sugawa no Michizane, a scholar, poet and courtier of the ninth century. He was successful and rose to gain considerable power, but was ultimately expelled from court due to political differences.

Michizane was born in 845, the Year of the Ox. According to legend, a faithful ox was his transport of choice to go into exile. Michizane is said to have been fond of oxen as they had protected him from assassins at one time. It is also held that after his death, the ox carrying his remains in his funeral procession stopped midway along the route. When the ox refused to go any further, people built a shrine on the spot where the ox halted to honor Michizane.

A series of disasters following Michizane's death, including plague, repeated lightning strikes and floods, prompted the ruling class to attempt to appease his assumed vengeful spirit by deifying him. He became Tenjin — the god of academics, scholarship and calligraphy — and his spirit was enshrined in shrines called Tenman-gu.

Today, there are estimated to be about 14,000 such shrines in Japan. One of the main ones is Dazaifu Tenman-gu in Fukuoka Prefecture, which is built over Michizane's grave.

“As a thunder god,” Jolivalt says, “Tenjin-sama is also praised to invoke rainfall, so he is considered a god of agriculture.” This is another link to the hardworking ox of the fields of ancient times.

Oxen or cows are regarded as messengers of Tenjin, which has resulted in the proliferation of statues of oxen in Tenman-gu shrines. Many statues are lying down as a reminder of the ox that rested during Michizane's funeral procession.



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Tenman-gu shrines are among the most popular shrines to visit for school and university students ahead of sitting important exams. Thousands of children, young people and their parents every year pray to Tenjin due to his association with learning.

Many of these shrines heavily feature the ox, but cows are present at other shrines in Japan, too.

This is due to “the old belief that cows have the power to cure disease,” says the spokesperson of the Association of Shinto Shrines. “Visitors who stroke the part of their body affected by their ailment and then stroke the same place on the statue of the cow will have their ailment cured.”

Popular spots for these *nade-ushi* (rubbing cows) in Tokyo include Hirakawa Tenman-gu near the Imperial Palace and Yushima Tenjin in Bunkyo Ward.

In the centuries that followed the deification of Tenjin, events and activities that involved asking the ox or cow to provide a good harvest and ward off disease spread across the country.

Until the destruction of Shakuzenji Castle in Osaka Prefecture in the 16th century, an almost life-size clay and wood ox was built and celebrated annually on July 6 and 7 in a ritual appealing for rainfall and a good harvest. Many customs are also still practiced today.

Meanwhile, in Aizuwakamatsu, Fukushima Prefecture, the *akabeko* (red cow) is both a local craft and treasure.

These wood and papier-mache toys featuring a bobbing head are based on a real cow used to build a local temple in the ninth century, according to legend. Over time, people came to believe that *akabeko* could drive off smallpox and other diseases.



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While regular shrine goers may be accustomed to recognizing cow imagery at shrines, 2021 will see shrines across Japan make an additional salute to the cow, according to the Association of Shinto Shrines. In keeping with the long-held practice of celebrating the new year and the animal associated with it as per the Chinese zodiac, shrines will display images related to the Year of the Ox.

People enjoying *hatsumode* (the first shrine visit of the year) in 2021 can expect to see decorations like ox-adorned *ema* (traditional Shinto plaques); there is a giant one on display at Kashihara-jingu shrine in Nara Prefecture. Visitors can also pick up their own plaques — which typically include an image of the animal associated with the year — on which they write a message or wish. The plaque is then hung within the shrine grounds. Auspicious items to keep or wear in 2021 are also available in exchange for a fixed donation.

The Association of Shinto Shrines says celebrating the start of the Year of the Ox with these items is due to the “customs in Japan derived from the Japanese culture of following the zodiac” rather than activities associated with religious beliefs.

For many people, putting out figurines or decorations related to the upcoming animal year involves little thought; it is as synonymous with new year as eating *mochi* rice cakes. In 2021, those decorations will mark the Year of the Ox, a year with significant, deep associations across many areas.

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