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## THE DESK

» Chinese New Year Wish **02**THIS WEEK  
COVER STORY» Meet Four People Born in the  
Year of the Snake **08**

## WORLD

» Public Diplomacy Mission  
Soft power of the people **16**

## NATION

» Ho-Bohemian Rhapsody  
Migrant workers take on the arts **20**

## BUSINESS

» Fostering Mega-Sized Industries **24**  
Key sectors reorganizing

## CULTURE

» Dine Dance Drink **28**  
No booze, no banquet

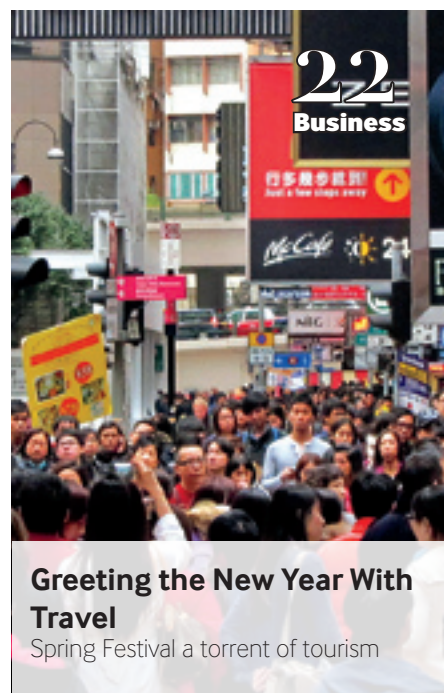
## FORUM

» Group 'Wedding' for Preschoolers? **30**

## EXPAT'S EYE

» The Real Story of Toy Guns **32**  
Or Kids, don't try this at home

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BREAKING NEWS » SCAN ME » Using a QR code reader

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# Chinese New Year Wish

The Chinese zodiac consists of 12 different animals that rotate around a 12-year cycle. Starting with rat and ending with pig, they take turns to accompany the lunar calendar.

For centuries, it has been held that there exists a special relationship between human beings and their zodiac animals, similar to Western astrology in relation to personal character. Today, some people still believe to some degree that the zodiac animal affects the disposition of those born in the corresponding year. In turn, the zodiac symbols have their own unique connotations, and are often endowed with positive personality attributes.

Now the Year of the Snake takes prominence, ranking sixth in the zodiac sequence as one of the earliest totems in Chinese history. Contrary to the prevailing concept of the animal in some countries, where it is regarded as a phantom of evil and treachery, the snake has long been associated with good luck and sacredness in China, where it is often described with affectionate sentiment in mythological classics and popular folktales.

Chinese people tend to add great significance to the period in which they were born and treat the recurring years in the zodiac cycle, known as *benmingnian*, with special caution and care. Many, regardless of age and sex, don red waistbands and socks alongside neck or wrist ornaments tied to red strings to exorcise evil spirits and invoke blessings throughout the year.

At the turn of a Lunar New Year, it has been a customary practice for people to bestow auspicious wishes to those around them, be they family members, friends or colleagues alike. As the Year of the Snake sets in, may we wish you, those born in this particular zodiac period, and the nation, a propitious, prosperous and happy year. ■

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# EMBRACING NEW YEAR

Tibetan students studying in Taiyuan, north China's Shanxi Province, dance at a party on Losar, the New Year's Day in the Tibetan calendar, on February 11.



## Mission on Sea

An officer aboard the Chinese marine surveillance ship *Haijian 137* collects evidence of Japanese vessels during the ship's patrol in China's territorial waters surrounding the Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea on February 14.

Two fleets of Chinese marine surveillance ships were carrying out routine patrol missions in the East China Sea and the South China Sea respectively around the Spring Festival, or the Chinese Lunar New Year, which fell on February 10 this year.



ZHANG JIANGONG

## Government Supports

The Chinese Government earmarked 87.5 billion yuan (\$14 billion) in subsistence allowances for the needy in cities and the countryside in 2012, up 16.8 percent year on year, said the Ministry of Finance.

Around 44.6 billion yuan (\$7.15 billion) was allocated to help 5.6 million rural families renovate

dilapidated homes last year, 163.7 percent higher than that in 2011. The Chinese Government also spent 2 billion yuan (\$320 million) in aiding vagrants and beggars, doubling the amount of 2011.

Meanwhile, 11.6 billion yuan (\$1.86 billion) was granted in relief funds for 75 million people affected by natural disasters and 2.4 billion yuan (\$385 million) was allocated to provide support for more than

600,000 orphans, according to the ministry.

## Green Buildings

China will demand that new buildings in cities achieve mandatory energy-saving standards and renovate existing buildings to make them greener by 2015, the country's top economic planner has said.

The standard for green buildings, which are resource- and energy-saving and environmentally friendly, will be adopted for all government-invested buildings from 2014, reported Xinhua News Agency, citing sources with the National Development and Reform

Commission (NDRC).

As of 2014, the standard will also be applied to affordable housing projects in major Chinese cities as well as to public constructions with an area of more than 20,000 square meters in a single building, said the NDRC.

It takes an extra cost of only 50 yuan (\$8) per square meter to meet the minimum requirements for green buildings, according to the NDRC. Renovations will be carried out on urban buildings to improve the efficiency of their heating systems.

China aims to construct 1 billion square meters of green buildings during the 2011-15 period and increase the number of green buildings to 20 percent of all new buildings in the country's cities in 2015, according to a government plan.



## ROMANTIC MEETING

Singles participate in a game at a speed dating event in Tongliao, north China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, on February 14, the Valentine's Day

## Trade Ranking

China's combined export and import volume in 2012 still ranked behind that of the United States when using the same measurement standards, the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) said on February 13.

The ministry expects the



MAO HONG

country's total international trade in goods to be \$15.64 billion less than that of the United States according to the measurement adopted by the World Trade Organization (WTO).

The announcement comes in response to a previous report that China, with its foreign trade amounting to \$3.867 trillion in 2012, has overtaken the United States as the world's biggest goods trading nation.

The U.S. Commerce Department released two sets of figures for its international goods trading—\$3.82 trillion (based on international balance of payments) and \$3.882 trillion (based on the measurement that is similar to the WTO's measurement), said a MOFCOM official.

The WTO typically adopted the latter figure in its annual international trading report that is due to be released in late February or early March.

China's export and import volume increased 6.2 percent year on year to \$3.867 trillion in 2012, according to the data issued last month by the General Administration of Customs.

## NGO Boosts

In 2012, the Chinese Government for the first time allocated 200 million yuan (\$32 million) to finance non-governmental organizations (NGOs). With this fund, 377 social work projects and more than 120 training programs were carried out, with 17,700 people trained and 1.85 mil-

## ROBOTIC SERVICE

A consumer takes a photo of a robot waiter in a newly opened restaurant in Harbin, northeast China's Heilongjiang Province, on February 13. The restaurant has 20 robots at work

lion directly benefited, according to the NGOs Administration under the Ministry of Civil Affairs.

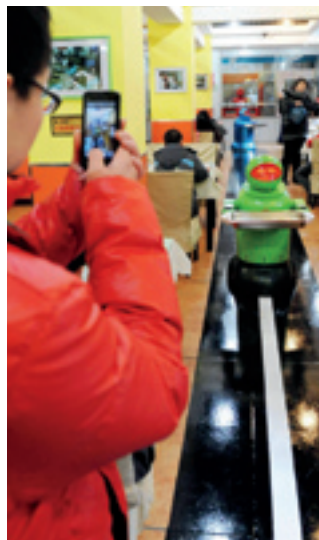
Apart from the Central Government's input, these projects involved a total investment of 320 million yuan (\$51 million), said the administration.

The Chinese Government has rolled out measures to boost the development of social organizations and bring their roles more fully into play.

In 2011, a pilot project designed to simplify the registration process for social organizations was launched. Under the pilot, social organizations may directly register with civil affairs authorities. It was previously stipulated that such organizations should find an administrative sponsor to supervise their activities as a precondition for registration.

## Fuel Upgrade

The State Council, China's cabinet, on February 7 issued a timetable for its program to upgrade fuel quality, with a strict standard to be promoted nationwide before 2017.



WANG JIANWEI

The country will issue the "fifth-phase" standard for automobile petrol, with sulphur content within 10 ppm (parts per million), before the end of the year with a grace period before the end of 2017, said a State Council statement.

Beijing is the only city in China to have adopted such a standard, equal to Europe's Euro V vehicle emissions cap of sulphur content below 10 ppm. But the "fifth-phase" standard for automobile diesel, with sulphur content within 10 ppm, will come earlier—before June this year—with a grace period before the end of 2017, the statement said.

The "fourth-phase" standard for automobile petrol, namely stating no more than 50 ppm of sulphur content, has already been issued.

Based on this, the General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine and the Standardization Administration will soon issue the "4th-phase" standard for automobile diesel with sulphur content within 50 ppm and the transitional time will expire at the end of 2014, according to the statement.

## Income Equality

China has unveiled reform guidelines on income distribution amid growing public concerns over a widening wealth gap.

The guidelines encourage further work to improve the initial distribution system and enhanced efforts to build a redistribution adjustment mechanism, said a statement from the State Council, which declared approval and transfer of the guidelines on February 5.

The guidelines call for a more transparent, fairer and reasonable income distribution order, the statement said. They stress the need to build and upgrade a sustainable mechanism to promote farmers' incomes.

China is aiming to double its 2010 gross domestic output and per-capita income for both urban and rural residents by 2020, according to a report released at the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China held last November.

## Dazzling Dragons

A bright spectacle illuminates a scene at the 19th Zigong International Dinosaur Lantern Festival in Zigong, southwest China's Sichuan Province, on February 3.

Zigong has held lantern fes-

tivals coinciding with the Chinese Lunar New Year for more than 1,300 years. This year, more than 80 groups of giant lanterns are on display at the event until mid-March.





# THIS WEEK WORLD



## MALDIVES

Former Maldives President Mohamed Nasheed (center) approaches the Indian Embassy in Male on February 13. Nasheed took refuge inside the embassy while being locked in a stand-off with police after a local magistrate ordered his arrest



## THE UNITED STATES

President Barack Obama delivers his State-of-the-Union speech before a joint session of Congress at the U.S. Capitol on February 12 in Washington, D.C. Facing a divided Congress, Obama focused his speech on new initiatives designed to stimulate the U.S. economy



## THE UNITED NATIONS

South Korean Foreign Minister Kim Sung-hwan, whose country holds the rotating Security Council presidency this month, told reporters on February 12 at the UN headquarters in New York City that the UN Security Council strongly condemned North Korea's third nuclear test







XINHUA/APP



XINHUA/APP



## BRITAIN

A man walks past a branch of Barclays bank in central London on February 11. Barclays said on February 12 that it intended to cut at least 3,700 jobs this year and the bank had plunged into an annual net loss



## MALI

Malian soldiers stand guard on February 10 in the northern city of Gao. Fights between Islamist rebels and Malian soldiers broke out in the city center, recently taken over by the French military, as Islamist groups staged two suicides bombings within two days



XINHUA/APP



## BRAZIL

Revellers of Rosas de Ouro samba school perform atop a float during the opening night of Carnival parades in Sao Paulo on February 8



COVER STORY

# MEET FOUR PEOPLE BORN IN THE YEAR OF THE SNAKE

Before the 2013 Spring Festival, *Beijing Review* reporter Ji Jing interviewed four people born in the Year of the Snake, each with their own unique stories representing a different generation. They shared their life experiences during the past 12 years (the Chinese zodiac is based on a 12-year cycle) and their hopes for the future. Although their life trajectories differ, they share one thing in common: When asked whether they possess the indomitable personality of the snake, they all said yes.



## The Characteristics of People Born in the Year of the Snake

The snake is said to be the most indomitable animal in the Chinese zodiac, because of its longevity and "rebirth" through the shedding of skin. This trait represents strong vitality and mystery. People born in the Year of Snake may have the same characteristics as the snake, and are likely to achieve success in careers and gain good fortune in life.

In addition, it is believed that people born in the spring or summer of the Year of Snake are energetic and vigorous, while those born in late autumn or winter are relatively quiet and introverted in accordance with the hibernation habits of the creature.



Gao Yuhong, born 1953

### Bettering Education for the Children of Fishermen

The biggest achievement in Gao Yuhong's life was saving a school on the brink of shutting down.

Back in the early 2000s, the Central Government launched a campaign to merge dispersed village schools in a bid to improve education in rural areas. Gao's school would have closed had it not been for his persistence.

"Our school is beside Gaoyou Lake," said Gao, a village middle school headmaster in Tianchang City, central China's Anhui Province. "Most of the students are fishermen's children. If the school was closed, these children would have to walk a long way to go to class," the 60-year-old says.

In order to prevent the school from shutting down, Gao improved teaching quality by sending his teachers to better schools to learn from the teachers there. He also expanded the number of extra-curricular music and fine arts courses. As the quality of education grew, students from nearby townships have been drawn to Gao's school, increasing enrollment from a few hundred to nearly 1,000. As basic teaching equipment was in short supply,

Gao was dogged in his efforts to secure funding from the local government. The school escaped closure.

Brought up in a fishing family, Gao feels an emotional closeness to the children of fishermen. All of his siblings live on a fishing boat, but Gao was the black sheep of his family and chose to attend university instead, eventually becoming a teacher.

"I joined the Communist Party of China in 1975 and the Party taught me to serve the people," Gao says.

Gao was headmaster at the school from 1987 to 2009. He's had four or five offers to leave the school for higher positions but refused all of them.

"I want to do something for the fishermen's children."

"Without a strong will I could not have prevented the school from being closed," Gao responds when asked whether he possessed the indomitable personality of a snake.

Although he could have retired last year, Gao says he'll stay on one more year because he wants to spend more time with the children. So what does Gao plan to do when retirement finally arrives?

"I'll surf the Internet and play cards with my friends."



**Chen Zuorong, born 1965**

## A Farmer Happy With Life

Chen Zuorong has been doing farm work her whole life, but she isn't complaining.

The 48-year-old woman of Beibaozhuang Village in Zibo, in Shandong Province, is satisfied with her life.

In the past 12 years, Chen has brought up three daughters—the youngest of whom began university last year—and transformed her old dilapidated house with a new kitchen, three bedrooms and a new living room.

Chen's husband works with a township tobacco company and earns a monthly salary of 2,000 yuan (\$321). Chen herself grows 1 *mu*—or roughly one sixth of an acre—of peach trees, 2 *mu* of corn and 1 *mu* of cotton and herbs. She earns around 4,000 yuan (\$642) a year by selling peaches and herbs, and the corn she grows can feed her whole family.

In Chen's village, women of her age do farmwork at home while their husbands find work in the cities, mostly as construction workers with a salary of 80 to 90 yuan (about \$13) a day. The husbands return to help their wives pick peaches during the harvest season.

"I have a lot of freedom. I do farmwork when I want to, and when I am tired I rest at home," Chen said.

With roughly half of China's population living in the countryside, the government has been paying increasing attention to the social welfare of rural residents in recent years.

Thanks to a pension scheme implemented a few years ago, Chen now pays 300 yuan (\$48) a year as a contribution and will receive a monthly pension after she turns 60.

"I feel happy because I will be paid a monthly pension like a retiree in the city," Chen said.

In the past, farmers were responsible for their own medical expenses. If a family member became seriously ill, the cost of receiving life-saving treatment could bankrupt an entire family. Now a medical insurance scheme is taking hold in rural areas, with the government's share of covering medical costs increasing every year.

Chen pays an 80-yuan (\$13) annual contribution to a healthcare insurance plan that covers more than 50 percent of her medical expenses. Official statistics show that the number of people covered by the rural insurance program skyrocketed from 80 million in 2003 to nearly 900 million in 2012.

Talking of the future, Chen said she has no plans to leave the farm.

"A farmer only retires when she grows too old to do the work."

## Where's the Future Headed?

Ji Li's view of the future can be summarized in a word that captures the sentiment felt by many young people of her generation: uncertain.

Ji's life in China's highly competitive job market isn't off to a great start, either. After failing the university entrance exam—a mandatory test required for those who wish to attend university—Ji's hopes of becoming a doctor were dashed.

"After failing the exam, I felt so bad that I cried very often," Ji, 24, recalled.

Ji now works at a pharmaceutical factory in Yiyuan County in Shandong Province. Factory work is a fate young people try to avoid, not wanting to work the long, monotonous hours their parents endured. She works six to eight hours a day, seven days a week. She receives double pay on weekends and triple pay on holidays. She can ask for sick leave, but those days are unpaid—and 15 yuan (\$2.41) is deducted from her salary each day. Her monthly sal-

ary amounts to a little more than 2,000 yuan (\$321) after tax.

During last year's Spring Festival she gave her parents her entire year-end bonus, equivalent to one month's wage. "They have worked hard on the farm all their lives to bring me up. I should be thankful," Ji said.

In China, young people from rural areas who work in cities not only have to support themselves but also their parents and grandparents, who earn a meager income and won't receive a pension until the age of 60.

Given her daily work schedule, leisure is often lacking. "I don't do anything fun. I do the same work every day. I only have fun when I go out to eat and sing karaoke with my colleagues, and that's only once or twice a year."

Ji isn't too hopeful about the future either, and like many young people who lack a university education, her employment choices are limited.

"I don't want to do this mechanical job all my life. I just don't know what I can do to make my life more meaningful. Maybe I'll just wait and see."



**Ji Li, born 1989**





Wang Wei, born 1977

## The Other Side of an Ambitious Business Woman

Already a successful business woman—with the tenacity of a snake to boot—Wang Wei thinks it may be time to focus on her family.

Over the past 12 years, Wang, a Beijing native, went from a business consultant to a CEO of a hi-tech company, but considers having given birth to a daughter more than a year ago her biggest success.

"No matter how accomplished a woman is in her career, having a baby is the biggest achievement," Wang says. "My daughter has made my life more meaningful."

Women like Wang are part of a new trend in China. Having received a higher education, women are no longer satisfied with being traditional housewives. In a male-centric China, many of these women defy the odds and become heads of companies.

But like Wang, many career women still want to start a family, although doing so could be a professional setback. In China, an intention to marry signals an intention to have a child, something undesirable in the eyes of some employers, pressuring many young women to hide the fact they may be married or plan on getting hitched.

"People knew I was married only after I became pregnant," Wang said.

Today, Wang's wish is to spend more time with her family and plans on retiring in the next five to 10 years to focus on her daughter.

"Since I have brought her to this world, I should be responsible for educating her and bringing her up."



**SNAKE MAIL:** A post office worker in Handan City, Hebei Province, shows off the newly printed Year-of-the-Snake stamp on January 4

COVER STORY



# CHINESE HISS-TORY LESSON

As Lunar New Year commences, local legends come to life By Bai Shi

**O**n January 5, Chinese stamp collectors flocked to post offices across the country to scoop up the new Year-of-the-Snake issue, in anticipation of the forthcoming Lunar New Year celebrations. According to the 12-animal-cycle, which includes the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog and pig, the Year of the Snake commenced on February 10 this year as part of the lunar calendar Spring Festival.

A red cartoon animal, surrounded by traditional symbols of luck and fortune, features on

the Year-of-the-Snake stamp, priced at 1.2 yuan (\$0.19). Due to popular demand, however, value has steadily increased. For instance, a 20-in-one stamp sold at 24 yuan (\$3.86) now carries an online tag of 480 yuan (\$76.19), 20 times higher than its issuance price.

Wu Guanying, 58, a professor and doctoral tutor of art at Tsinghua University, designed the stamp, alongside a number of well-known icons such as the 2008 Beijing Paralympics mascot Funiu Lele and the Rabbit Year stamp of 2011.

Started in April 2012, Wu and his team chose the final pattern from among 30 alterna-

tives. "It is difficult to draw a snake on a stamp, compared to other animals from the Chinese zodiac such as the tiger or the dragon," he explained. "It's mainly due to its shape, which is hard to fit into a rectangular frame. Thus, I tried my best to make the image look vigorous and well-rounded."

As early as 130 million years ago, snakes have covered the Earth. There are a total of 2,500 species in the world, with 209 in China.

Though snakes have no feet, they can move rapidly, with little to obstruct their path and have long been portrayed as mysterious





creatures in Chinese culture.

## Snake in Chinese culture

Unlike implications of evil in Western culture, snakes were important totems for ancient Chinese 5,000 years ago. In primitive religions, the animal was worshiped as a symbol of strong fertility. Accordingly, the early ancestral father and mother of China, Fu Xi and Nu Wa, were both described as combining snake bodies and human heads. Even today, the tradition of snake worship remains common in some rural areas where snakes are seen

as incarnations of deceased relatives.

The animal played an additional part in the birth of another mythical beast, the dragon, which shares some of its features, such as neck and body. However, snakes remain inferior. For instance, the Year of the Snake follows that of the dragon in the Chinese zodiac. Symbolizing supreme power, both creatures were often embroidered onto clothes of imperial emperors and ministers. The difference was that emperors wore dragon robes while ministers wore snake robes.

Interestingly, snakes are also closely related to love in local folklore. Evidence of this can be found in the *Legend of White Snake*. The story, first put down in writing by novelist Feng Menglong (1574-1646) on the base of oral folk materials, depicts a touching love story, full of romance and frustration, between a white snake spirit and a young man.

A boy saved a white snake from the hands of a hunter. A thousand years later, the snake succeeded in becoming immortal and changed its shape into a young lady named Bai Suzhen. She decided to find her benefactor and repay him for his kindness by marrying him. The boy had been reincarnated as a young man called Xu Xian. They met beside the beautiful West

### HALF-SNAKE TOTEM:

The legendary ancestors of Chinese, Fu Xi (right) and Nu Wa are depicted as human-snake hybrids on a Tang Dynasty (618-907) tomb mural in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region



Lake in Hangzhou, where they fell in love at first sight. After their subsequent marriage, however, trouble started. In particular, a monk named Fa Hai tried his utmost to disengage the union of snake spirit and man.

Nevertheless, Bai and Xu persisted in their love, for which the former was imprisoned in Leifeng Pagoda while the latter was forced to become a monk. *Guanyin*, the Goddess of Mercy in heaven, moved by their love and honesty, eventually reunited the couple.

The tale has remained popular in modern times, reworked into movies, TV series, drama, strengthening the image of the snake in Chinese culture where it has become a symbol of bravery and loyalty.

Other local legends depict the animal as clever and steadfast in dealing out revenge to villains.

However, contradictory attitudes exist. Many Chinese dislike and even fear the snake due to its shape and lethal venom. A local idiom even describes a malicious person as having a heart of vipers.

The creatures are often described as crafty and insidious. The story of the Farmer and the Snake from *Aesop's Fables*, reminds people not to show mercy on frozen snakes to avoid being bitten when the animals rejuvenate.

According to China's lunar calendar, the 2013 spring began on February 4, which was still part of the Year of the Dragon. This means there is no lunar spring beginning in the Year of Snake, which some believe to be a bad omen for weddings and births.

Yu Zhiqiu, an astronomer at the Chinese Astronomical Society, explains that the lunar

calendar is not as regular as the Gregorian one and the first day of spring changes every year. However, "It has no relation to good or bad luck," he said.

As time passes, the cultural implications of the snake has weakened among Chinese with the diversification of modern lifestyles, with many regarding the zodiac as merely an interesting cultural symbol. However, the traditional festival remains the largest national celebration. ■



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