

How Did the Rabbit Get on the Moon? Notes for the Year of the Rabbit

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On January 22, 2023 the Year of the Rabbit began in China. The rabbit (*tuzi* 兔子) is the fourth animal in the Chinese zodiac signs. This year, which according to the traditional counting is *guimao* 癸卯, it is connected with the element water.

Since the beginning of the Zhou era (11th century BC) jade animal figures were given as supplementary gifts in tombs but they were also jewellery pendants or utility items favoured by the upper class – and among them we find many figures of rabbits.



Two jade rabbits carved from a single pebble. The object's flat underside suggests that it was used as a paperweight. China, 14–15 centuries (Yuan or early Ming Dynasty). H. 3.8 cm, w. 6 cm, l. 7.6 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Bequest of Florance Waterbury, in memory of her father, John I. Waterbury, 1968. Open Access.

According to an ancient mythological idea, the rabbit lived on the moon, which led to its epithet “Moon Rabbit” (*yuetu* 月兔) or also “Jade Rabbit” (*yutu* 玉兔), because of its white fur. How the rabbit got there can be traced back to a Buddhist legend from India: Buddha, in the guise of a hungry and lost pilgrim, begged the animals of the forest for help. Whereas the jackal and the otter brought their own booty to the pretend pilgrim,

the rabbit offered itself as food and threw itself for him into the fire. Buddha rewarded the rabbit's self-sacrifice by placing him on the moon as a shining example.¹

Typical representations dating back to Chinese Daoism show the Moon Rabbit standing on his hind legs under a cinnamon tree in the courtyard of the Moon Palace, where he uses a mortar and pestle to make the elixir of immortality from the bark of the cinnamon tree. That is why the rabbit is also a symbol of long life. On the moon he joins the other inhabitant of this celestial body, the moon goddess Chang'e 嫦娥 ("Eternally Exalted"), wife of the mythical archer Hou Yi 后羿. She had stolen the pill of immortality from her husband and therefore fled to the moon, where as a punishment she was changed into a three-legged toad.² The cosmological idea of toad and rabbit as inhabitants of the moon is very old. The two can already be seen on the famous "soul banner" of the Western Han period (207–9 BC) on a crescent moon – the banner was found in the tombs of Mawangdui in Changsha and represents the ascent of a deceased person to the immortals.³



Moon Rabbit with mortar and pestle, depicted in H.Y. Lowe, *The Adventures of Wu: The Life Cycle of a Peking Man*, vol. II, Peking: The Peking Chronicle Press 1941, p. 34. Copy in the library of the Monumenta Serica institute.

The moon is a very popular motif in Chinese painting and poetry – it was particularly often sung about by the famous “poet prince” of the Tang period, Li Bai 李白 (also Li Taibo 李太白, 701–762). In the following poem, Li Bai immortalised the mythical inhabitants of the moon and thus also the moon rabbit:

- 1 Julie Bredon – Igor Mitrophanow, *The Moon Year: A Record of Chinese Customs and Festivals*, Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh 1927, pp. 407-409.
- 2 Bredon – Mitrophanow, *The Moon Year*, pp. 412-414. There the moon goddess is called “Hèng O” (Hèng O 嫦娥). On the myth of Chang'e, see also Anne Birrell, *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction*, Baltimore – London: John Hopkins University Press 1993, pp. 144-145 (“Chang O Escapes to the Moon”).
- 3 See Ulrich Wiesner (ed.), *Herbstmond über der Tauterrasse: Der Mond in der Kunst Ostasiens* [Autumn Moon over the Dew Terrace: The Moon in East Asian Art], Cologne: Museum of East Asian Art 1990, p. 11.

As a boy I did not yet know the moon.
 I called it a white marble disc,
 I thought it was a shining, bright mirror,
 Flying through the blue fringes of the clouds.
 I also saw the hidden moon fairy beckoning
 And saw the Cassia tree's dense foliage.
 The white rabbit was pounding herbs in a mortar
 Of eternal life. Who will get them?
 Then the evil toad came crawling along
 And maliciously gobbled up the bright disc. –
 Once there was an archer, shot nine sunbirds,
 Then the world was purified and at rest.
 But there the woman in the moon only beguiles you. –
 Desist, desist, and look not at her! –
 Why does this yearning creep quietly into my heart
 And fill my eyes with tears.⁴

In the pantheon of Chinese popular belief the rabbit is venerated as a deity. It has an important role as moon rabbit and rabbit god in the Chinese annual cycle, namely on the moon festival or mid-autumn festival (Zhongqiujie 中秋節), that is celebrated on the 15th day of the eighth month of the lunar calendar. Before this festival, brightly painted clay figures depicting the rabbit god Tu'er ye 兔兒爺 – usually dressed in martial garments and riding horses or tigers – were traditionally hawked in shops in Beijing. Such figures of the rabbit god were very popular as gifts or toys for children.⁵ They even found their way into the proverbial sayings typical of Beijing (*xiehòuyǔ* 歇後語), such as in this example: “Rabbit gods are fighting – a shambles in the stall” (*Tu'er ye dajia – san tanzi* 兔兒爺打架—散攤子). This figuratively means “to break up a business” or “to go separate ways.”⁶

At the Moon Festival, families in China sacrificed to the Moon Rabbit on specially arranged house altars.⁷ Depictions of the moon rabbit with its mortar also decorate the round moon cakes (*yuebing* 月餅 or *tuanyuan bing* 團圓餅) eaten on the occasion of the family reunion (*tuanyuan* 團圓) for the Moon Festival. The size of the moon cake tradi-

4 The German translation, on which the English is based, is by the well-known China missionary Richard Wilhelm, quoted from *Li Tai-bo: Rausch und Unsterblichkeit* [Intoxication and Immortality], selected by Günther Debon, Munich *et al.*: Kurt Desch 1958, p. 50. The Chinese original is called “Gu lang yue xing” 古朗月行.

5 See the description and illustration of such a figure in H.Y. Lowe, *The Adventures of Wu: The Life Cycle of a Peking Man*, vol. II, Peking: The Peking Chronicle Press 1941, pp. 32-33. – The photo of a stall with figurines of the rabbit god is included in Bredon – Mitrophanow, *The Moon Year*, after p. 404.

6 Cf. Elke Spielmanns-Rome – Wolfgang Kubin (eds.), *Wörterbuch der chinesischen Sagwörter (Xièhòuyǔ)* 汉德歇后语词典 [Dictionary of Chinese Sayings], Hamburg: Buske 2009, p. 391. More examples of sayings with the rabbit god are to be found on this and the following page.

7 The cover of Lowe's book, *The Adventures of Wu*, shows a house altar on the moon festival in a typical Peking house courtyard; on the altar is the paper figure of a moon rabbit. Lowe's book entertainingly depicts Beijing customs and traditions that were still alive in the city in the first half of the 20th century. The author was probably a Beijing native named Lu Xingyuan 盧興源, about whom nothing more is known. – See also the account of a similar Moon Festival ceremony in Bredon – Mitrophanow, *The Moon Year*, pp. 400-401.

tionally depended on the number of family members into which the cake was divided to be eaten together as a good omen for family unity.⁸

In more recent times a tribute was paid to the close connection of the rabbit with the moon in space travel. A Chinese space probe named “Yutu” (Jade Rabbit) landed on the Earth’s satellite in 2013, making China the third nation to successfully land on the moon.

At the end of the two-week Spring Festival, the Lantern Festival, which is celebrated on the 15th day of the first month of the new year, the rabbit is very much present in Shanghai. You can buy all kinds of rabbit lanterns, in all colours and shapes, around the Yu 豫 Garden in Shanghai’s old town. Originally they had a frame made of bamboo, but today it is mostly made of metal. Plastic rabbits are now also common. Incidentally, rabbit lanterns are not only on offer in Shanghai in the Year of the Rabbit but at every lantern festival.⁹



Rabbit lanterns in Shanghai, 2015. Photograph by Dagmar Borchard. Reprinted with kind permission.

Shanghai is also the origin of the popular “White Rabbit” brand of milk chews (*dabaitu naitang* 大白兔奶糖), which have been produced by the Guanshengyuan 冠生園 company since 1959. In addition to the original vanilla flavour, they are now available in various flavours, but as in the past, individually wrapped in two layers of paper, wax paper on the outside, printed with the iconic blue-white-red rabbit motif, and edible rice paper on the inside. For many Chinese, the sweets evoke nostalgic childhood memories.

One of the two Year of the Rabbit stamps launched by the PRC Post Office in early January recently caused quite a stir. The cartoonish image of a blue rabbit with red eyes holding

8 Lowe, *The Adventures of Wu*, p. 35.

9 My thanks go to Dagmar Borchard for the information about the Shanghai rabbit lanterns, the picture and other suggestions for this article.

a fountain pen in one hand (not paw!) and a piece of writing in the other is by the artist Huang Yongyu 黄泳玉 (b. 1924), who is well-known as well as infamous for his teasing images. His “demonic” rabbit portrayal immediately sparked an argument among Chinese netizens: The rabbit was interpreted as the “Omicron Rabbit”, which kept a list of the Corona-dead at the height of the pandemic in China. Many saw the stamp value of 1.20 yuan, the current postage for a domestic letter, as an allusion to the Chinese emergency number 120. The debate about the motif of the “ugly rabbit” certainly had a sales-promoting effect; the special stamp, which was printed in large numbers, was sold out shortly after it was issued. In a short video, Huang, soon to be ninety-nine years old, tried to smooth the waters around his work, justifying himself by saying that he had only wanted to give pleasure with his rabbit painting. The blue colour of the rabbit is an allusion based on homophony: *lantu* 藍兔 (blue rabbit) is meant as a New Year’s wish and means something like “great plans” (*hongwei lantu* 宏偉藍圖).¹⁰



Blue rabbit stamp by Huang Yongyu for Chinese New Year 2023. Photograph by China-Zentrum.

In actual fact, the blue of the stamp motif was perceived as a bad omen, since auspicious rabbits are traditionally depicted in white or red in China. That Huang Yongyu is an artist who is well versed in the history of Chinese painting is proven by his second stamp this year for the Year of the Rabbit: It shows three rabbits in white, yellow and light blue running in a circle on a red background. In the middle, like a faint stamp imprint, is the image of the Moon Rabbit with its mortar. The motif of the rabbits arranged in a circle is a clear allusion to a 1,500-year-old depiction of rabbits in the Mogao 莫高 caves in Dunhuang 敦煌. The famous painting of the “Three Rabbits with Common Ears” from the Sui Dynasty (581–618) shows three rabbits running in a circle, whose heads – in contrast to Huang’s painting – are all in the middle of the circle and are painted so close that together

10 On the debate around stamps and other work of Huang Yongyu see Johnny Erling, “New Year Rabbit from Hell,” China.Table, last update Jan. 20, 2023, <https://table.media/china/en/opinion/new-year-bunny-from-hell>.



Three rabbits in white, yellow and light blue running in a circle with the matching stamp envelope for the year 2023. Photograph by China-Zentrum.

the rabbits have only three ears.¹¹ This particular motif of the three rabbits moved along the Silk Road to Europe, where it can be found in many churches – including the well-known “Three Rabbit Window” in the late Gothic cloister of Paderborn Cathedral. In the Christian context, the motif symbolises the Divine Trinity.¹² Because of the controversy surrounding the “Hell Rabbit”, this second special stamp of Huang Yongyu for the Year of the Rabbit was hardly noticed in China – apart from some critics who also saw an allusion to the Corona pandemic in the moon rabbit visible in the background, pounding medicine with his mortar.

Huang Yongyu’s blue rabbit seems to contradict some of the qualities commonly attributed to this much-loved animal in China, namely amiability and a sense of harmony. But its mischievous laugh also hints at the rabbit’s ability to react quickly, to suddenly take to its heels and to seize favourable opportunities. All these qualities could have a favourable influence on the Year of the Rabbit and ensure global and individual happiness!

11 On this motif in relation to Huang Yongyu’s stamp and other depictions of rabbits in the history of Chinese painting, see Wu Haiyun, “How an Aging Artist Put His Stamp on the New Year”, *Sixthtone* Jan. 21, 2023, www.sixthtone.com/news/1012134.

12 On the Three Rabbits Window see the PDF “More on the Three Rabbits Symbolism” on the following website: www.paderborn.de/tourismus-kultur/sehenswuerdigkeiten/Hasenfenster_Sehensw.php. My thanks go to Fr. Martin Welling SVD for the reference to the Paderborn Three Rabbits Window.