

Goat, sheep, ram – which is it?



Chinese astrologists in ancient China originally referred to mountain goats, like this wild one, when they first linked the eight of the 12-year cycle in Chinese astrology to the goat.



Universiti Putra Malaysia's Animal Science Department associate professor Dr Zainal Aznam Mohd Jelani.



Just to add to the confusion over goats and sheep, the geep is a genetic cross between the two animals.

goats so when you see one here, you think Dr Zainal says the goat is

PHILIP GOLINGAI is goaded into finding out which animal the Chinese New Year is supposed to herald and why the confusion.

THE Year of the Horse is coming to a close and next weekend, the Goat comes skipping in ... or is it the Sheep? Er, Ram?

Now if you were born in 1907, 1919, 1931, 1943, 1955, 1967, 1979 or 1991, are you a goat or a sheep?

According to Dr Ong Hean-Tatt, a Chinese culture specialist and author, you can be either.

"They are two different animals but they share the same symbol," he explains. "In Mandarin, *yang* means goat and sheep because the same Chinese character is used for both animals."

(But to be precise, the word for sheep is *mian yang*.)

He says the animal Chinese astrologists in ancient China originally referred to was the mountain goat.

He adds that the *yang* is used to symbolise the eighth of the 12-year cycle in Chinese astrology because astrologers noticed that those born in that particular year possessed certain characteristics of the animal.

"Chinese astrology is a shrewd observation of human characters and it uses an animal that typifies general characteristics of those born in a certain year," Dr Ong explains.

Universiti Malaya Chinese Studies Department associate professor Dr Soo Khin Wah concurs with Dr Ong. He says Malaysians can call 2003 the Year of the Goat, Sheep or Ram (which is really a male sheep), depending on which word they like.

"They can use the word that they think gives a better sound. For example, 2001 can be the Year of the Snake or the Year of the Serpent depending on which (word) you prefer," he says. Similarly, he adds, one can say Year of the Rooster or Cockerel.

Indeed, this "personal" preference is underscored by leading pewter manufacturer Royal Selangor's decision to use the "Year of the Ram" for its specially designed limited edition plaque to usher in the Chinese New Year.

"We went through the lot – goat, sheep, ram – and we found the ram to be the most majestic and it suited the product we were designing," says Royal Selangor communications executive Wong Wei Kim. "We did not consider the goat. As for using the word 'sheep', we thought no because 'ram' sounds a lot better. The ram also gives the image of a bold and proud animal."



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Like the Chinese, the Malays have the same basic word (*kambing*) for both animals. *Kambing* is a goat while *kambing biri-biri* is a sheep. With this, and the double meaning of the Chinese yang character, no wonder Malaysians are so confused!

While Dr Ong and Dr Soo may argue that there is no difference between a sheep and goat from a linguistic point of view, that's not the case from a zoological viewpoint.

Universiti Putra Malaysia Animal Science Department associate professor Dr Zainal Aznam Mohd Jelani says both animals are as different as mutton and chevon.

"Sheep and goat are two different species. They look different and their chromosome compositions are not the same. That is why

the two animals," he says.

The simplest and most effective visual way of separating goats from sheep, the veterinarian says, is the carriage of the tail – in all domestic forms, goats' tails are erect while those of sheep are pendent.

Sheep and goat meat are also classified differently. Sheep meat is called mutton while goat meat is chevon.

"Most Malaysians mistake mutton for goat meat," says Dr Zainal.

He adds that another misconception is the assumption that the goat is a local animal while all sheep are imported. A sheep species called *malin* is indigenous to Malaysia, he says, while the local goat species is *kambing kacang*.

"Many people think that only the goat is local to Malaysia.

This is because you see



The character 'yang' for 'goat'

goats so when you see one here, you think that it (sheep) is an imported animal," explains Dr Zainal.

Characteristically, the two animals – although grouped as small ruminants that are various hoofed, even-toed mammals – are as dissimilar as a ram and a buck (male goat).

The goat is more independent than a sheep, says Dr Zainal. "Just compare their eating styles: a goat will browse, picking leaves here and grass there, while a sheep will graze, putting its head down like a cow and feeding on the grass available in its path."

Sheep are stupid, says Dr Zainal, but not goats. "Sheep have sheepish behaviour," he jokes.

"The sheep is cowardly and is easy to manage as it has flocking instinct. That's why a dog can herd a flock of sheep. But the goat is very smart as it chooses its own path, making it difficult to herd."



Dr Zainal says the goat is difficult to confine as it will "climb here and climb there."

In his observation of goats, Dr Zainal says they are independent, outgoing, intelligent, aggressive, adventurous and choosy while sheep are the opposite.

If goats and sheep are so different, it makes you wonder why the Chinese have the same character for both creatures. And those differences throw up a question for people like me who are

born in 1967: Do I want to be a goat or a sheep? After what Dr Zainal had to say, I want to be a goat. Definitely.

But, biblically, I am making the wrong choice: The goat represents the Devil and in early Christian art, goats came to symbolise sinners and the damned. This was supported in part by a passage from the Bible: "All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them

rates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left." (Matthew 25:31-46)

The goats represent the sinners that the shepherd – Jesus – must separate from the righteous, represented by the sheep.

Looks like a dead goat will end up in a boiling pot of *sup kambing* or a flaming kebab of chevon while the sheep will be grazing on golden grass in heaven.

Back on earth, if my parents lived in China and believed in Chinese astrology, I might have never been born in the Year of the Goat.

This is because of the belief that the goat is the least auspicious sign in Chinese astrology as those born under the sign may have bad luck for the rest of their lives. According to recent news reports, even in present day China, some couples avoid conceiving a child who will be born in the Year of the Goat. In contrast, the birth rate in Chinese communities the world over shoots up every Year of the Dragon, the most revered sign in the calendar.

(For the more enlightened, however, having children in 2003 could be a smart move. After all, fewer children born will mean less competition for them when it's time to start school, go to college and, eventually, get jobs.)

In South Korea, it

is reportedly the opposite. Koreans, whose lunar calendar follows the Chinese one, have histori-



The sheep is genetically – and characteristically – different from the goat.

cally shunned the idea of having daughters born in the Year of the Horse, which precedes what they call the Year of the Sheep. They believe that girls born in the Year of the Horse would take after the animal and turn out wild and restless. Instead, the Year of the Sheep is considered the best year for a presumably docile daughter!

In his book, *Chinese Animal Symbolisms*, Dr Ong states that the good points of a goat person are: easygoing, sweet, gentle, compassionate, dislikes strict discipline, fond of children and nature, artistic, creative, fashionable and affectionate.

The bad points: easily overcome by emotions, tiresome and pessimistic, indecisive, not methodical and superficial in love and marriage.

For children born in the Year of the Goat, one of the taunts we got in primary school was that we were afraid of the rain. That made me more determined to play football in the rain. A more recent taunt I received was that the goat is the most unglamorous animal in the Chinese zodiac.

That goaded me into checking out the Internet to

find out famous goat people. And I am proud to report that Julia Roberts, the *Pretty Woman*; Pamela Anderson, the "sexiest woman alive"; and Nicole Kidman, the newly anointed Golden Globe Best Actress; are goats. I kid you not. (See story on page six for more famous goats.)

Although Dr Zainal said goats and sheep cannot mate and produce offspring, science did what nature could not: In the early 1980s, scientists fused together the embryos of a sheep and a goat and created a new hybrid creature that had not existed before. The animal with chromosomes from both species is called a geep. It is a chimeric animal with the head of a sheep and the body of a goat.

Interestingly, nature has since "copied" science. In 2000, government veterinarians in Botswana reported the existence of a geep that resulted from mating occurring naturally between a female goat and male sheep kept in the same enclosure on a farm. (You can check out the BBC report at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/813466.stm>)

Now, for those who can't make up their minds which animal to name the new lunar year after, they might consider calling 2003 the Year of the Geep.

■ **Butt right in and let us know what you think of this story, especially if it gets your goat. Write to starmag@thestar.com.my.**

Also, look out for the astrological predictions for the new year in 'StarTwo' on Thursday.

