

A snakey, snarky year ahead



THIS N THAT

BY HALIMAH MOHD SAID

THE Chinese horoscope is a wealth of folksy wisdom, intertwining animal attributes with people's characteristics, matching human personality and character traits with their propensity for acquiring worldly fortune, and generally predicting life's choices for the wisest and most foolish of the species. In a way, it's no different from the western zodiac in describing what we are and what we might be. We have great faith in our zodiac signs, swearing by the symbolic traits they identify and the human characteristics they signify. Being a Leo and a Dog, I swear I was born to be a leader like the lion, inspiring loyalty like the dog.

The Snakes among Malaysians born in 1917, 1929, 1941, 1953, 1965, 1977, 1989 and 2001 must be sharpening their fangs and intensifying their venom to extract the most out of the Year of the (Water) Snake as their cunning and keenness, intelligence and wisdom will be tested in the different spheres of their lives. Of special interest will be work and business as Snakes are said to be great mediators, working modestly in the business environment but privately scheming and plotting to ensure things turn out to their advantage.

Beneath the slick exterior, the Snake is said to be one of the most intuitive, introspective, refined and collected of the animal signs. Apparently, Snakes take adversities with ease and do not become flustered easily; they are attractive and graceful people, exciting and dark at the same time.

Being a bit of a folksy linguist I'm curious to know how the word "snake" is used in Chinese, both literally and metaphorically. Presumably the Chinese character for "snake" ... Shé refers to the animal called "snake", ie it is the literal meaning of the Chinese word/character. But it would be most interesting to know if the word is also used in an idiomatic or metaphorical sense. If so what are its figurative permutations and meanings? Is the metaphorical snake represented by the same character in Chinese?

An article in the *Journal of Language Studies* Volume 12(1), January 2012 *A Corpus-Based Study On Snake Metaphors In Mandarin Chinese And British English* by Wei Lixia and Wong Bee Eng of Universiti Putra Malaysia studies the cross-cultural use of snake metaphors. The researchers conclude that while there is a marked difference in the number of metaphors identified - 1,152 in Chinese and 113 in English - they are similar in identifying a negative meaning (83.4% and

77% respectively) when the snake attributes are mapped on to humans. There is apparently a gender-bias too with the negative meaning being stronger for women ("treacherous") than for men ("greedy" or "cruel").

Not knowing Chinese, I shall turn my attention to the word "snake" in English, its literal and figurative references and the meanings associated with them. A dictionary definition of the noun "snake" might sound something like "a long limbless reptile (suborder Ophidia or Serpentes) that has no eyelids, and jaws that are capable of considerable extension" and the verb "snake" means "move or extend with the twisting motion of a snake".

Among the physical attributes of the snake are its slippery skin, its zigzag movement, its vicious tongue and prickly bite, its oft-poisonous venom and its combative attacks. By extension, the words that describe them can be mapped on to humans as in "slippery

character", "zigzag political stance", "zigzag slander", "poisonous hate" and "combative attitude". In the examples, the natural animal qualities assume a negative connotation when applied to people.

The more imaginative a language user, the more he or she is able to find synonyms and collocations to create new and extended meanings from the basic repertoire of words. Thus the maligned person can be described as "a slippery, sneaky and furtive character"; an unreliable politician can be said to have "a zigzag, flip-flop and shifty stance"; the hate one feels can be at once "poisonous, spiteful and vindictive"; and an aggressive person can launch a "combative, contentious and hostile"

attack. The choice of snake-related words can be as extensive as your imagination and a good thesaurus allows you to be. From experience I've learnt that one can be quite snakey in one's use of language, shifting between an indirect, convoluted, meandering style to one that is less surreptitious.

The best-known English idiom is snake in the grass referring to a treacherous or deceitful person. In most cultures, the snake is not a well-liked creature stemming from the animal's role in the religious and cultural traditions of the people. It's interesting, therefore, that the Chinese horoscope identifies many outstanding attributes that Snakes have which they can use to advantage to achieve positive outcomes. Among politicians especially, the snakey characters can resolve to be less snarky and nasty. Instead, they should scheme and plot to mediate a better society.

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