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Eto

Coming up with witty references to sheep for their home-made New Year's greeting cards was the problem taxing creative minds throughout Japan in December. Knitting, the Woolmark, insomnia . . .

But why sheep? The answer is found on our cover. These figurines represent the twelve animals, or branches, of the calendar system used in East Asia for over three thousand years.

The twelve animals form an ordered set—rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog, and boar. Thus, on the cover, the rat, starting the cycle, is at the top, with the next animal, the ox, to its right. Moving clockwise, we end with the boar, only to begin again with the rat.

Combining the animal branches with a second set of ten symbols, the elemental stems, produces an ordered cycle of 60. This sexagenary cycle (eto in Japanese) is used to define a 60-year calendar cycle, which is repeated ad infinitum. Documents thus may indicate an event occurred in the "fire-dragon" year, with only context to make clear whether that was 716 or 1976.

The cycle of animal branches is also used to divide the day into twelve segments and to indicate compass directions. The sheep is 2 p.m. and south-southwest. Today, though, few speak of getting together at the hour of the dog or of moving dragon-ward.

Nor does the elemental stem defining the year now attract much attention. People know whether this is the year of the dragon or the snake but, usually, not what the stem is.

One exception is the fire stem combined with the horse branch; women born in yang fire-horse years are traditionally believed to make dangerous wives, apt to murder their spouses. In 1966, the last such fire-horse year, Japanese couples' efforts to avoid producing potential murderesses produced a noticeable drop in the birthrate.

No need to beware in 2003, however. It is the twentieth year in the cycle, a water-sheep year. Sheep, not wolves in sheep's clothing, will flock at New Year's, in the greeting cards exchanged, the ornaments displayed in homes over the holidays, and the charms received during shrine visits.