

Passing on the Baton

New ad film retells Chinese zodiac legend
By Sudeshna Sarkar

Recently, a short film has gained traction on social media. The ad film, created by the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC), the largest bank in the world by assets, and one of the world's largest bank-card schemes UnionPay, for the ICBC's new zodiac credit card, reinterprets the legend about the Chinese zodiac. It aims to promote an ancient civilization that has embraced modernity and yet retained its traditions.

The Chinese zodiac, consisting of 12 animals and symbolizing Chinese folk culture, has a long history and is a fountainhead of folk art and legends. The zodiac is a 12-year cycle, where each year has its own animal sign. It means all Chinese have their own zodiac sign.

The film reinterprets the legend of how the zodiac was created by the Jade Emperor, the ruler of heaven. He announced a race among all birds and beasts with the first 12 to be chosen for the 12 signs of the zodiac. In the

legend, the rat arrived at the finishing line first, thereby becoming the first animal in the zodiac. Then the order in which other animals arrived became their order in the zodiac system.

In the film, the zodiac symbolizes time, which is passing forever. It also represents the propagation and inheritance of traditional Chinese culture through time. Traditional culture is passed on to young people, who are writing the contemporary legend of Chinese culture.

This passing on of traditional culture is depicted in the film through a relay race in which the participants are 12 young people. They wear animal masks, which combine traditional patterns with modern elements. They are the contemporary incarnations of the 12 zodiac animals.

They run through the entire country, from the traditional lanes of Beijing with their rows of courtyard houses to highways passing through towering mountains, deserts,

deep seas, the Great Wall, and even the sky. Each runner passes on the baton to the next following the order of the animal signs in the zodiac and each uses a different mode.

The modes include parkour, skateboarding, an off-road vehicle, the high-speed train and a rocket ship. They present to viewers not only China's vast and various landscapes but also its achievements in modern times.

The rat is the last one to get the baton, which turns out to be a traditional red scroll. When the scroll unfurls, the message is revealed: "Continuing to write our own legend."

The film fuses traditional culture with high technology to create a sequel to the old zodiac animal legend, which is about inheritance and innovation. This theme also aptly captures today's young people, who follow contemporary popular culture while interpreting and spreading traditional Chinese culture in their own way. ■



A still from the ICBC film (COURTESY PHOTO)

A Twist in the Tail

The Chinese Year of the Rat brings creativity and hope
By Ji Jing

For Han Meilin, the Chinese New Year of the Rat, which starts on January 25 according to the Chinese lunar calendar, has a stupendous wealth of associations. The 83-year-old artist, known for his animal paintings, was himself born in the Year of the Rat. In 1996, another Year of the Rat, when Atlanta held the 26th Olympic Games, he had the honor of creating the Five-Dragon Clock Tower, a 10-meter-high sculpture in the city's Centennial Olympic Park. In 2008, the last Year of the Rat, when China hosted its first Olympic Games in Beijing, he was the chief designer of the Games mascots.

In the English-speaking world, the word rat generally conjures up negativity, associated with cunning, deceit and betrayal. But since the Chinese New Year began to be celebrated worldwide and created awareness about the richness of other cultures, *chunjie* or the Spring Festival, as the Chinese New Year is popularly known, has become a cultural landmark heralding a new start and a platform for creativity.

Han's creativity continues in the New Year of the Rat with China Post selecting him to design its two special stamps to mark the New Year. The first shows a leaping rat, a reference to a Chinese folk tale in which the rat bit the sky to create an opening so that sunshine could come to Earth. "The jumping rat symbolizes the wish for a better life in the new year," Han explained on his website.

In the second stamp, a rat family of father, mom and baby sit by a small pile of peanuts, looking into the distance expectantly. That image represents the wish for a bountiful harvest and a happy family life in the new year.

Stamp connoisseurs' interest in the Year of the Rat goes beyond borders. For example, on Guernsey, the British island in the English Channel, the postal authorities have commissioned Sydney-based artist Chrissy Lau to design Year of the Rat stamps, the seventh set in its Chinese New Year series.

Special Chinese New Year calendars have become collectors' items and a tradition. The Palace Museum Calendar, first published from 1933 to 1937, is more than a calendar. Coming in the size of a pocket book, it is a mini encyclopedia of Chinese culture, with half of the pages carrying images of historical

places and priceless artifacts.

"While protecting cultural heritage, the museum aims to integrate traditional culture into everyday life," Wang Xudong, Curator of the Palace Museum, said at the launch ceremony of the 2020 calendar in August 2019.

The Palace Museum, also known as the Forbidden City, was the royal residence of the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties. This year is the 600th anniversary of the Forbidden City.

The interconnectivity of culture can be seen from U.S. financial services company Wells Fargo bringing out a Year of the Rat calendar for its customers, while in Yekaterinburg, Russia, the Glavnry Prospekt International Arts Center held an "Oriental Calendar" prints exhibition to showcase East Asian zodiac culture.

It's a brisk time for businesses as well. U.S. cosmetics maker Clinique has launched its Year of the Rat highlighter where the powder cakes look like the face of a rat. DHL is energetically promoting on Twitter its handbook *How to Reach Chinese Millennials*, a 400-million group of well-heeled consumers who are difficult to ignore by any business wishing to see profits rise. Even Walt Disney World, whose patron saints include Mickey Mouse, a

first cousin to the rat, is drumming up business with traditional Chinese celebrations like the dragon dance.

However, the Year of the Rat means much more for the Chinese people. There is a special dimension to the year 2020, which is the deadline for China's poverty alleviation campaign. All residents living below the national poverty line—a per-capita annual income of 2,300 yuan at 2010 constant prices (\$340 at the 2010 exchange rate)—are expected to rise out of poverty by the end of 2020.

While over 800 million people have been rescued from poverty since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, which UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres called "the greatest poverty reduction feat in history," around 6 million people still live in poverty. Helping them live a better life is essential to building a "moderately prosperous society in all respects." ■

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Year of the Rat stamp series issued by New Zealand Post (XINHUA)