

When Young Chinese Ask, 'What's Your Sign?' They Don't Mean Dragon or Rat (Published 2017)

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Uncle's Friends Cafe & Store in Shanghai offers cakes and decorations featuring Western astrological symbols to young Chinese. Credit... Yuyang Liu for The New York Times

BEIJING — China, the birthplace of the Chinese zodiac and some of the world's oldest and most sophisticated fortunetelling techniques, has a new obsession: Western astrology.

What remains a largely niche interest in the West has in recent years become a mainstream cultural trend in China, especially among the younger generation. At dinner tables and in coffee shops, friends and strangers trade the latest gossip and tidbits about their astrological profiles.

Online, social media accounts with millions of fans dispense weekly horoscope forecasts. On dating websites, users list their zodiac signs

alongside other basic information like age, salary, and car and home ownership status.

Starting in the 1990s, Western astrology began to seep into China, mostly through variety shows from Taiwan, which caught the astrology bug early on. After the spread of the internet, a seed of interest soon blossomed into a torrid love affair.

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While concepts like the traditional Chinese zodiac are still relevant, they are often dismissed by millennials here as “the older generation’s pastime.” Western astrology, on the other hand, is seen as more fun. Much as some Westerners have embraced Eastern practices like Buddhism, young Chinese are gravitating toward Western astrology because they say it is new and exotic.

“People don’t get as excited about traditional culture because it’s too familiar,” said Liu Hongchen, an astrologer known as Eskey among his more than nine million followers on Weibo, a popular microblogging site. “The younger generation likes Western culture more, and the interest in Western astrology is a perfect example of this.”

More and more Chinese are consulting the ancient practice for celestial guidance on all kinds of major life decisions: relationship advice, making friends, having babies — even hiring employees.

Que Gangjian, a manager at a car sales company in the southern Chinese city of Changzhou, said that true to his nature as a Pisces, he was better at handling the so-called softer side of the business. So when it came time to recruit a sales representative, Mr. Que considered what skills would be best suited to the demanding job and would complement his own.

After listing the mandatory requirements — a hardworking attitude, a driver’s license and a quick tongue — Mr. Que inserted another line into the online job posting: “Scorpios, Capricorns and Geminis preferred.”

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“People who fall under these three signs tend to be more persistent — they don’t give up as easily,” Mr. Que said in a telephone interview. “So really this is just to save time and make the hiring process more efficient.”

It is not the only instance of what has become known in China as “zodiac discrimination.” A [recent survey](#) showed that 4.3 percent of college graduates looking for jobs in China had experienced discrimination based on their Western or Chinese zodiac sign. On Baidu Baike, the Chinese version of Wikipedia, there is even an entry for the term “xingzuo zhaopin,” or job recruitment based on Western zodiac signs.

Of the 12 horoscope signs, Virgos, or those born between Aug. 23 and Sept. 22, have an especially rough time. Described as perfectionists, Virgos — and Virgo men in particular — are considered to be constantly on the defensive. While the criticism is mostly tongue in cheek, the sign has become so tarnished that some Chinese employers go out of their way to emphasize in job postings that, yes, Virgos are welcome to apply, too.

The derision has prompted much introspection among Virgos.

“Sometimes I think about whether my personality has been shaped by the stereotype,” said Yan Rubin, 35, a Virgo and an electronics engineer in the northern Chinese city of Xi’an. “I wouldn’t say it’s discrimination, necessarily, but I guess we’re just different from the other signs.”

Hu Xiaofei, like many of her friends, had a strong aversion to Virgos until she discovered that her boyfriend’s birthday fell within the ill-fated range.



At Uncle's Friends Cafe & Store in Shanghai, the menu includes food items like "Aquarius Cake." The cafe is based on Tongdao Dashu's popular satirical zodiac-themed cartoons. Credit... Yuyang Liu for The New York Times

"Well, he wasn't a true Virgo," said Ms. Hu, 28, a Taurus who works in public relations in Shanghai. "His mom changed his birthday when he was younger so he could make the age cutoff for school."

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In any case, Ms. Hu said she did not take horoscopes that seriously. "It's just something to read everyday when I'm bored on the subway," she said, adding that they certainly they did not influence her life decisions.

Well, that is, with one exception.

"Oh, I would never date a Cancer," Ms. Hu said adamantly. "They might be good family men but most of the Cancer guys I know dabble outside their marriage. It's really bad."

Over the centuries, China developed a set of sophisticated divination techniques for use within and outside the imperial court. Today, many Chinese still consult fate-calculating practices like bazi, which

determines a person's fortune based on birth year, month, date and hour.

And the traditional Chinese zodiac, which features 12 animals representing 12 years, is so widely referenced that in 2014, several provinces [reported a spike](#) in births among young couples hoping to have their babies in the last weeks of the auspicious Year of the Horse to avoid the less favorable Year of the Sheep.

China is, of course, not the only place where interest in the occult thrives. A [survey](#) by the National Science Foundation, published in 2014, found that in recent years the number of Americans who said they believed that astrology was "sort of scientific" or "very scientific" was on the rise.

The difference in China is the visibility of the phenomenon. Unlike in America, there is little embarrassment about believing in Western astrology. Determining your fortune based on the interaction between the sun, the stars and the planets is just what Chinese have been doing for hundreds of years.

At the root of Western astrology's popularity, some astrologers say, is a growing thirst for spiritual guidance.

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"In America, you have religion," Panda Cao, a Chinese astrologer based in Washington, said. "But in China, most people don't have a defined belief system. They don't have a godlike figure to help them find a solution or guide them in a certain direction. So Western astrology helps fill that gap."

Never mind all the skeptics who say astrology is a pseudoscience.

"Didn't Reagan like astrology?" Ms. Cao asked, referring to Nancy Reagan, the former first lady who is [said to have kept an astrologer on retainer](#) while her husband, President Ronald Reagan, was in the White House. "So I don't think you can say that it's completely false."

For some astrologers, the growing obsession has translated into big business. Cai Yuedong, also known as Tongdao Dashu, shot to online fame in recent years with his [satirical zodiac-themed cartoons](#).

In December, Meisheng Culture, a local investment firm, spent \$32 million to acquire a 72.5 percent stake in Tongdao Dashu's company. There are now plans to spin off the popular social media account, which has over 12 million fans on Weibo and many more on Tencent's messaging app WeChat, into a sprawling zodiac-themed franchise.

To be sure, China has plenty of astrology skeptics. In December, Guokr, a popular science website, organized an [online lecture](#) that used scientific arguments to defend against the growing prominence of Western astrology.

"Western astrology is the most annoying trend," said Yu Jun, a science editor at Guokr and a die-hard skeptic. "A person's personality has nothing to do with his or her star sign."

But every once in a while, Mr. Yu said, he finds himself succumbing to the celestial pressure.

"Sometimes I'll joke about horoscopes with my friends," Mr. Yu, a Pisces, admitted. "But my star sign is the sign that is least likely to believe in star signs."

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