Many people inquire about the Tibetan system for naming the years. The Tibetan system of chronology originally derived from Chinese and Indian sources. The two systems are both based on cycles of sixty years, but they differ in the method of naming them. While both continue to be used independently for various purposes (e.g., astrology), the common mode of reckoning time for the population at large follows.

First, there is a repeating cycle of 12 years in which each year is named for a particular animal. This corresponds exactly to the Chinese zodiacal year designations often found on restaurant placements:

1. Mouse

2. Ox

3. Tiger

4. Hare

5. Dragon

6. Snake

7. Horse

8. Sheep

9. Monkey

10. Bird

11. Dog

12. Pig

There is a second repeating cycle of 10 years named for the five elements in their male and female forms. This aspect is absent from the Chinese system.

1. Wood, male

2. Wood, female

3. Fire, male

4. Fire, female

5. Earth, male

6. Earth, female

7. Iron, male

8. Iron, female

9. Water, male

10. Water, female

Within a sixty year cycle, the animal names repeat five times, and the elements repeat six times. Thus, by combining them, a unique designation for each year is obtained. For example, the wood (female) ox year would follow the wood (male) mouse year and precede the fire (male) tiger.

*Adapted from* A Grammar of the Tibetan Language*, written by Alexander Csoma de Koros in 1834.*