

CHINESE ZODIAC ANIMAL SET



The five Chinese zodiac elements — Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water—interact with the twelve animal signs over a sixty-year cycle to influence personality and destiny.



illustration: Chisa Hidaka

FIRE HORSE WOMAN

Chisa Hidaka

THE *HINOE-UMA*—THE FIRE Horse woman—is so rageful and obstinate, she is destined to shorten her husband’s life and ruin her family’s prospects. Or so the Japanese superstition says. This year—2026—is a Fire Horse year. The previous one—1966, when my sister was born—saw a 20 percent dip in births in Japan. Our parents were apparently not deterred. Yet when my little sister cried, when she tore off the ears of my favorite

stuffed animal, when she refused to go to school even with hefty bribes, the *hinoe-uma* personality was the explanation. Never could it be that she took after our father, who was also quick to anger and always demanded his own way.

My sister and I have not spoken in more than two years. Our already difficult relationship worsened when our father fell ill. Soon after his death, communications between her and

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me stopped. I long for some kind of reconciliation, but in the face of her stubborn silence, I am lost. I have no idea what she would need from me or whether that would be something I can muster.

I drew this Fire Horse [previous page] with my sister in mind. Completing the sexagenary zodiac cycle of animals and elements, she will be sixty years old this year. I wonder if she is thinking about her cultural burden and how it played out in our family dynamics. Even if we were on speaking terms, I could never ask her about such things without completely riling her. So I looked for answers in the story of the original *hinoe-uma*.



Yaoya Oshichi was a teenage girl who was burned at the stake in 1683. Oshichi's tragedy began in conflagration. Fleeing the great [Tenna Fire of Edo](#) (now Tokyo), her family took refuge at

a temple. A temple page caught Oshichi's eye, lighting up her heart. When her family returned home, she could not forget him. Unable to extinguish her passion, she attempted to re-create the circumstances of their meeting by torching her own home. Her incendiary plan was discovered before the house burned, but she was tried and punished for arson.

The Tenna Fire was one of the forty-nine great fires to devastate the city during the Edo period (1600–1868). Less than thirty years before, the most catastrophic Meireki Fire (1657) took an estimated 100,000 lives. In the ensuing 200 years, nearly 1800 smaller blazes incinerated property and ruined lives. Wooden townhouses with paper doors and straw mat floors that were heated by charcoal-burning fireplaces crowded the streets of Edo. Once ignited, flames galloped uncontrollably through the haphazard arrangement of these tinderboxes that were hastily built to accommodate explosive population growth. The infernal city consumed itself as it continuously rebuilt and expanded. "Fires and quarrels are the flowers of Edo," an old saying goes.

For Oshichi, burning down her house may have been too obvious a ruse. Arson was common. Fires begot more fires. Outcasts, undomiciled by fire, set others' houses on fire, looting from the ashes as their only means in a rigidly stratified social and economic system. Steeplejacks, trained



Utagawa Kunitaru, *Portrait of Yaoya Oshichi*, 1867
Utagawa Kunitaru, *Yaoya Oshichi*, 1867

“To be ignited by ninjo is human nature, but to maintain a peaceful society we must live by giri. The fires must be quelled.”

to climb construction scaffolding, served as firemen but are suspected to have spread fires to improve their work prospects in the economically challenging time. Vengeance and jealousy scorched the city. Court records tell of servants setting fires to masters' homes and business owners lighting fires to competitors' shops. Even children played with fire. Military officers tortured and bullied the indigent for the sake of false confessions, facing no repercussion for mistaken arrests. Suspected arsonists were paraded through the streets in what citizens derided as *kojiki shibai* (“pauper plays”).

Oshichi's story spread, not by performative justice but by wildly popular stagings of *bunraku* puppet plays and *kabuki* theater, as well as literature and visual art. Amid the pyromaniac culture of Edo, Oshichi's tale inspired artists and mesmerized audiences. In *Five Women Who Loved Love* (1686), in which each protagonist suffers gravely from loving love too much, the fourth story is about Oshichi. In the climactic scene of the *bunraku* play *Date Musume Koi no Higanoko* (*The Furious Love of a Greengrocer's Daughter*, 1773), Oshichi ascends a fire tower to ring the alarm bell as snow swirls around her. Sounding a false alarm will be punished by death, she knows. But it is the only way she can force open the city gates, closed by a nightly curfew, in order to reach her

lover. Trembling in fear but compelled by desire, she sounds the false alarm. The unquenchable fire is only in her heart. In *kabuki* plays, her lover is a samurai whose high rank prevents him from marrying a mere greengrocer's daughter. Oshichi is again portrayed setting fire to her own home in the hopes of reuniting with her lover. The numerous and now famous woodcut prints of Oshichi in these plays, which served as advertisement posters, is a testament to their popularity.

How these stories became conflated with the Fire Horse is hazy. If Oshichi was born in the Fire Horse year of 1666, she would have been seventeen years old at her death in 1683. In a heartbreaking exchange, the magistrate asked whether Oshichi wasn't actually fifteen. Unaware of his attempt to save her from capital punishment by having her be tried as a minor, Oshichi is recorded as having replied that no, she was sixteen. Despite an imperfect alignment of dates, Oshichi transformed into a wild, burning horse.

Oshichi's is not a “Romeo and Juliet” tragedy about the untimely demise of young, earnest love. In *bunraku* plays, romantic love inevitably ends in tragic death, lest social harmony be disrupted. I remember learning in college about the thematic struggle between *giri* (“social obligation / duty”) and *ninjo* (human / personal feeling) in Japanese literature. To be ignited by *ninjo* is human nature, but to maintain

a peaceful society we must live by *giri*. The fires must be quelled.

When I was fifteen, my boyfriend was an intravenous drug user seven years my senior. Clubbing through New York in the eighties, we're lucky we did not get AIDS. Risking my life for a youthfully incomplete idea of love, I was much more like Oshichi than my sister. My sister did sneak into Studio 54 with her friends a few times. Maybe she tried cocaine. But her high school beau was the sweetest puppy dog of a boy who came from a good family and who adored her. The fact my sister remains unmarried after having given back four engagement rings is, of course, chalked up to the curse of the Fire Horse. But the truth is that every decision was carefully considered, not made in a fit of furious passion. She could not possibly move to Australia to wed the guy dad nicknamed “Crocodile Dundee” as long as our parents were in the US. Nor could she marry a man who had never stepped outside the country given that our father was a foreign correspondent, and she aspired to work in international finance. Falling on the side of *ninjo* has never seemed to be her curse at all.

Our father was the one who was most like a Fire Horse, although he was born in the year of the boar. Of course, for a man, Fire Horse qualities carry no social stigma, whether destined by the stars or the result of genetics and upbringing. Our father was a TV journalist who worked tirelessly and



Yoshitoshi (1839–1892), *Yaoya Oshichi Climbing a Fire Lookout Tower*

enthusiastically; he wrote dozens of books and produced and hosted hundreds of episodes of his own show. His presence was always the biggest and loudest in the room. Disagreement was not a possibility; his opinions would be shouted again and again verbatim, no matter how cleverly I could counter what he said. He believed he was brilliant, and he deemed early on that I, the first-born who was verbally precocious, was the “smart one” who took after him. This set me on a lifelong pursuit to show him who I “really” am—painter, singer, dancer. I even got an MD, like his brother, the nemesis with whom he was incommunicado for decades. My sister worked even harder to be seen, but in the opposite direction, to be more like him. She was not satisfied being the “pretty one.” She visited our grandmother—his mother—regularly; she got an MBA and pursued work in Japan leveraging Dad’s contacts; she happily accompanied him to events where the guests of honor were political conservatives who would have made me run for the door, or worse. Finally, at one of my last visits with Dad, he told me, “Your sister is actually very capable.” I hope she knows she finally succeeded.

My sister and I have never been close. For most of our lives, the distance was maintained passively, outlined by interests and pursuits that simply did not overlap. But the COVID pandemic broke us apart. I left the

city, while she stayed to support our mother, who had declined to join me. By the time our father was diagnosed with heart failure, then cancer, too many terse texts had left space for too much misunderstanding. My sister determined that we could never visit him together. We could not be at his side together, not even when he died.

In my sister, I can see no trace of Oshichi. But in the gap between us, I see the very dilemma that made Oshichi’s story into distinctively Japanese art and theater, burning *hinoe-uma* into the Japanese psyche long after the plays went out of style. If I think of the turning points of our lives as choices between *ninjo* and *giri*, my sister has often, if not always, chosen *giri*. I characteristically fall on the side of *ninjo*, never able to ignore my inner voice. What I see as being true to myself, may to her be a profound betrayal of ancestral values.

I drew the Fire Horse with my sister in mind—a spirited mare with flames for mane and tail, but also emblazoned with flowers. The flowers recall chrysanthemums, a symbol of Japanese royalty. The purple of Oshichi’s kimono is a dark background. Americans might see a flirty Pink Pony. For her and for us, I hope to evoke the “Red Horse” or *chi-ma*—the more ancient, Chinese version of the year when the intensity of the fire element coincides with the boldness of the horse, ushering in an auspicious time of vitality and revolutionary change. 🌸