

Animals and prosperity

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The domesticated pig is an important part of any Khmer household.

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Growing up in a city have you ever wondered how life in the rural areas must be like? In most countries in the Asia region, agriculture is the primary means of livelihood and so a majority of the people live in villages. And animals are an important part of life on the farm. Often, in Asia, farmers talk of their poultry and pets in the same breath as their children when they are introducing family members. A farmer even before uttering his own name would say, "I have two daughters, one son, four chickens, three cows, two dogs and five pigs!"

Talking about pigs let me share with you some "piggy tales" from rural life in a republic in South East Asia called Cambodia. In the parts of that country that follow the Chinese calendar, the pig is an important astrological symbol corresponding to the Western zodiac sign Scorpio.

The Chinese lunar year is named after 12 animals, one of which is the pig. The domesticated pig is an important part of any Khmer household in a village and as in astrology it may signify abundance, likewise owning or not owning a pig would determine the degree of prosperity of the farmer's family.

In Cambodia there is actually a "piggy bank". This is a living bank with pigs in them, from where farmers can procure a piglet against a loan, and tend it on their farm and fatten it up for sale. The pigs are primarily sold for their meat. Pig sacrifices too are not a rarity. Whole pig heads can be served on a platter with rice. There are still some tribes who as part of their ceremonial practices exchange pigs.

In a land that thrives on rice, pigs too are fed rice bran. But they can even eat all that humans do and sometimes if they escape from their pens on the homestead can even devour their owner's dinner!

Perhaps that is why most Cambodian homes are built on stilts to keep the animals from coming in. Nevertheless, having a pigsty is indicative of multi-purpose farming.

However, one of the most interesting scenes on the Cambodian highways is when a pig is being taken to the market. Motorcycles are the main means of travel there.

So you would often see a farmer riding his motorbike with a pig tied upside down on the pillion! The pig is usually alive and the sight of a very pink, round creature strapped by his back onto a wooden trough or just simply roped to the backseat, squealing all the way to town is a sight indeed. Makes one wonder if that's where the word "piggyback" riding came from!

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