

Character Builder 您好嗎？

The basic unit of the Chinese language is the *zi* (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each *zi* has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string *zi* together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

This week: Words about animal symbolism

Pronunciation: *niu* (Putonghua, 2nd tone), *ngau* (Cantonese 4th tone)
Basic meaning: ox, cattle, bull, cow

牛 symbolizes exploited labourers. 黃牛 (*huang niu* = yellow/brown~oxen), 水牛 (*shiu niu* = water~buffalo) pull the plough. 種牛 (*zhong niu* = seed~bulls) mate with 母牛 (*mu niu* = female~ox = cows). 乳牛 (*ru niu* = milk~ox = dairy cattle) produce 牛奶 (*niu nai* = cow~milk).

Restaurants serve 牛肉 (*niu rou* = cow~meat = beef), 牛排 (*niu pai* = beef~steak). Jeans are 牛仔褲 (*niu zai ku* = cow-boy~trousers/slacks). Tourists watch 鬥牛 (*dou niu* = fight~bull = bullfights) in Spain.

九牛一毛 (*jiu niu yi mao* = nine~oxen~one~hair = one hair from nine oxen) means a tiny fraction of huge resources. 老牛破車 (*lao niu po che* = old-ox~broken-down~cart) describes old China's backward/poor/hurt rural economy.

by Diana Yue