

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

虎

Pronunciation: *hu* (Putonghua, 3rd tone), *foo* (Cantonese 2nd tone)
Basic meaning: tiger

虎 (= 老虎 *lao hu* = old-tiger) symbolizes regality/ferocity. 虎將 (*hu jiang* = tiger~general) means formidable general/fighter. 虎山行 (*hu shan xing* = tiger~mountain~trip = penetrating tiger country) means going ahead despite dangers. However, 馬虎 (*ma hu* = horse~tiger) means sloppy/un-thorough, 馬馬虎虎 (*ma ma hu hu* = horse~horse~tiger~tiger) means “not so great”.

虎頭蛇尾 (*hu tou she wei* = tiger~head~snake~tail) = big start, weak finish. 騎虎難下 (*qi hu nan xia* = ride~tiger~hard-to~dismount) means caught in a difficult/awkward situation hard to shake off.

虎口餘生 (*hu kou yu sheng* = tiger~mouth~remain~alive) means fortunately escaping from peril. Pedestrians are warned “馬路如虎口” (*ma lu ru hu kou* = carriage/automobile~road~like~tiger~mouth) = “Beware of cars!”