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 MTR

線 means line/linear/link. 線索 (xian suo = thread/line-seek) = clue. 電話線 (dian hua xian = electric-talk-line) = telephone line. 有線電視 (you xian dian shi = has-line-electric-watch) = cable TV.

航線 (hang xian = voyage-line) = ship’s/plane’s route. 行車線 (xing che xian = move-car-line) = traffic/car lanes. 鐵路線 (tie lu xian = iron-road-line) = railway line. 地鐵線 (di tie xian = ground-iron-line) = underground railway line. 轉線 (zhuan xian = change-lines/lanes).

針線 (zhen xian = needle-thread) = sewing/needlework. 穿針引線 (chuan zhen yin xian = thread-needle-guide-thread) means pulling strings to facilitate plans/actions. 牽線木偶 (qian xian mu ou = pull-string-wooden-figure/doll) means string puppet or somebody acting entirely under another’s control/manipulation.

Pronunciation: xian (Putonghua, 4th tone), sin (Cantonese, 3rd tone)
Basic meaning: line, string, lane, route

by Diana Yue