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 bureaucrats

Pronunciation: guan (Putonghua, 1st tone), goon (Cantonese, 1st tone)
Basic meaning: official, bureaucrat, government authorities

In feudal China 大官 (zuo da guan = be-big-officials = occupying high-ranking government posts) meant power/wealth. 官員 (guan yuan = officials) represented 官方 (guan fang = official-side = government authorities), commanded 官兵 (guan bing = government-soldiers/army), ruled 老百姓 (lao bai xing = old-hundred-surnames = commoners).

In 官場 (guan chang = officials-field/arena = bureaucratic world), even 芝麻小官 (zhi ma xiao guan = sesame-small-official = low-ranking officials) took bribes.

官字兩個口 (guan zi liang ge kou = “官”-word-two-unit-mouths) = officials have the largest say. 官官相# (guan guan xiang hu = official-official-mutual-protect) = officials cover each other. Thus,官逼民反 (guan bi min fan = officials-force-people-revolt = unpopular rule provoked rebellion).

by Diana Yue