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 sea creatures

蝦, with radical 虫 (chong = insect/worm), are crustaceans: 海蝦 (hai xia) = sea prawns, 河蝦 (he xia) = river shrimps. 蝦汛 (xia xun = shrimps-tide/surge) means shrimp season, when shrimps swarm the seas and rivers. 龍蝦 (long xia = dragon-prawns) means lobsters.

蝦 and 蟹 (xie = crabs) are common seafood. 白灼蝦 (bai zhuo xia = plain-boiled-shrimps), 醉蝦 (zui xia = drunken-prawns) and 清炒蝦仁 (qing chao xia ren = unmarinated-stir-fried-shrimps-seed/ball) are famous dishes. Chinese cooking often uses 蝦米 (xia mi = shrimps-rice = sun-dried small shrimps).

蝦兵蟹將 (xia bing xie jiang = shrimp-soldier-crab-general) means a sloppy army/team. 大頭蝦 (da tou xia = big-head-shrimp) is saying facetiously someone is very absent-minded.