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

Pronunciation: bei (Putonghua, 4th tone), booi (Cantonese 3rd tone)
Basic meaning: molluscs, seashells

貝 = 貝類 (bei lei = shells-species) = molluscs: 蟹 (bang = 蟹 lei = crabs), 海螺 (hai luo = sea conch), 牡蠣 (mu li = 蠔 hao = oysters), 扇貝 (shan bei = fan-clams = scallops). 珠貝 (zhu bei = pearl-mollusc) means clams/oysters which produce pearls. 乾貝 (gan bei = sun-dried-scallops) is the flavorsome conpoy.

貝 also = 貝殼 (bei he = shell-cover) = seashells. 貝雕 (bei diao = shell-sculpture) means the art of shell-carving. Seashells were used as cash in ancient China, thus the radical 貝 means wealth/money, e.g. 財 (cai = wealth), 寶 (bao = treasure). 寶貝 (bao bei = precious-seashell) means a valuable gem/object, something with magical powers, or somebody’s darling.

by Diana Yue