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 education

生
Pronunciation: sheng (Putonghua, 1st tone), saang (Cantonese 1st tone)
Basic meaning: student

生 basically means “beget”, “birth”. 學生 (xue sheng = study-begotten) means students: 小學生 (xiao xue sheng = little-school-pupils) in primary schools, 中學生 (zhong xue sheng = middle-school-students) in secondary schools, 大學生 (da xue sheng = big-school-students) in colleges/universities. 留學生 (liu xue sheng = stay-study-students) means students studying abroad.

Examination candidates are 考生 (kao sheng = examination-students). Graduates are 畢業生 (bi ye sheng = complete-studies-students). 舊生 (jiu sheng = once-time-students) means alumni. A scholar’s intellectual protégés are his 門生 (men sheng = door-students = those embracing his school of teaching).

書生 (shu sheng = book-scholars) means those who know books (but little else). 小生 (xiao sheng) is the young scholar/man’s role in operas/movies.

by Diana Yue