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 friendship

友 (yǒu) (Putonghua, 3rd tone), yau (Cantonese 5th tone)
Basic meaning: friend

Pronunciation: you (Putonghua, 3rd tone), yau (Cantonese 5th tone)

友 = 朋友 (peng you) = friend: 好友 (hao you = good friend); 筆友 (bi you = pen pal); 男友 (nan you = male-friend = steady boyfriend); 女友 (nu you = female-friend = steady girlfriend). 友善 (you shan = friend-kind) = friendly. 友愛 (you ai = friend-love) = amity.

豬朋狗友 (zhu peng you you = pig-companions-dog-friends) means good-for-nothing friends. 酒肉朋友 (jiu rou peng you = wine-meat-friends) meet for fun but nothing more. 誤交損友 (wu jiao sun you = wrongly-make-harmful-friends) means foolishly trusting bad people.

諍友 (zheng you = criticism-friends) give you well-meaning criticism/advice. Fellow-fighters/soldiers are 戰友 (zhan you = battle-friends). Manual workers are amicably called 工友 (gong you = worker-friends).

by Diana Yue