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 confections and sweets

餅 (radical 食 shi = eat/food) include 餡餅 (xian bing = stuffing-crusty-cake = pies), 蛋糕 (dan gao = egg-fluffy-cake = cakes), 餅乾 (bing gan = cake-dry = biscuits). In Hong Kong afternoon tea is typically 西餅 (xi bing = western-style-cake), 奶茶 (nai cha = milk-tea = tea with milk).

Chinese people eat fried soft dough pieces called 燒餅 (shao bing = fired-cake), 油條 (you tiao = oil-strip) with 粥 (zhou = rice-gruel = congee). The Mid-Autumn Festival is celebrated with 月餅 (yue bing = moon-cakes).

畫餅充饑 (hua bing chong ji = draw-cake-fill-hunger) means comforting oneself with unrealizable plans. Cantonese idiom 阿茂整餅 (a mou zheng bing = guy-named-Mou-makes-cakes) means making unnecessary things/moves to boost one's image/reputation.

by Diana Yue