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 weddings

Pronunciation: shì (Putonghua, 4th tone), saì (Cantonese 6th tone)
Basic meaning: swear, vow, oath

誓 (radical 言 yan = words) = spoken vow. The wedding couple proclaim their 結婚誓詞 (jie hun shi ci = tie-knot-marriage-oath-words = wedding vow) in front of 証婚人 (zheng hun ren = witness-wedding-persons).

People 發誓 (fa shì = raise-oath) = 宣誓 (xuan shi = declare-oath) asking Heaven/God to be their witness. 誓要 (shi yao = vow-want = vow to do something), 誓死 (shi si = vow-death/to die) and 發毒誓 (fa du shi = make-poisonous-vow) show determination. 誓死不從 (shi si bu cong = vow-death-not-obey) means would rather die than obey the oppressor.

A love pledge is山盟海誓 (shan meng hai shi = mountain-pledge/alliance-sea-vow): “As the hills and the sea are our witness ...”

by Diana Yue