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 birthdays

肖 = resemble. 形肖 (xing xiao = form-resemble = outwardly resembling), 神肖 (shen xiao = spirit-resemble = expression-wise resembling) describe portraits/acting. A不肖子 (bu xiao zi = un-alike-son = unlike his dad) means a bad/wayward son.

The Chinese zodiac has twelve 生肖 (sheng xiao = birth-resemblance = zodiac animal signs) rotating in a 12-year cycle. Each person is affiliated to the animal of his/her birth-year: 鼠 (shu shu = affiliation-rat), 牛 (niu = ox), 虎 (hu = tiger), 兔 (tu = rabbit), 龍 (long = dragon), 蛇 (she = snake), 馬 (ma = horse), 羊 (yang = ram), 猴 (hou = monkey), 雞 (ji = rooster), 狗 (gou = dog), 豬 (zhu = pig) and has that animal’s attribute, e.g. gentle, fierce, sly.

by Diana Yue