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 staple foods

豆 means peas/beans, e.g. 紅豆 (hong dou = red-beans), 黃豆 (huang dou = yellow-beans = soy beans), 蟻豆 (can dou = silkworm-beans = broad beans). 豆荚 (dou jia = pea-pods) contain 豌豆 (wan dou = peas). 豆青 (dou qing) is the colour pea green.

芽菜 (ya cai = sprout-vegetable = bean sprouts), 豆腐 (dou fu = beancurd = tofu) are indispensables in Chinese cooking. 豆漿油條 (dou jiang you tiao = bean-soup-oil-long-piece = deep-fried dough) is the commoner’s breakfast.

目光如豆 (mu guang ru dou = eye-light-resemble-beans) describes someone with no vision for the future. 豆腐渣工程 (dou fu zha gong cheng = beancurd-dregs-engineering) describes sub-standard and easy-to-collapse building structures.

Pronunciation: dou (Putonghua, 4th tone), dau (Cantonese 6th tone)
Basic meaning: bean

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