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 myths and legends

神 (radical 神 = shen = god)
Pronunciation: shen (Putonghua, 2nd tone), san (Cantonese, 4th tone)
Basic meaning: spirit, god

Humans have 神智 (shen zhi = spirit-rationality/consciousness). Supernatural 神 = 神靈 (shen ling = god-spirit/soul): 神聖 (shen sheng = god-holy/sacred), 神廟 (shen miao = holy-temple), 神媒 (shen mei = gods/spirits-go-between = medium).

希臘神話 (Xi La shen hua = Greece-transliterated-god-talk = Greek myths/mythology) reflect 多神論 (duo shen lun = many-gods-theory = polytheism). Christians uphold 一神論 (yi shen lun = one-god-theory = monotheism), worship 耶和華 (Ye He Hua = Yahweh/Jehovah-transliterated). Atheism is 無神論 (wu shen lun = no-god-theory).

Chinese deities include human-headed-snake-bodied伏羲 (Fu Xi), Taoist super-deity 玉帝 (Yu Di = Jade-Emperor), Buddhist bodhisattva 觀音 (Guan Yin), sea goddess 媽祖 (Ma Zu = Mother-Ancestor), King of Hell 閻王 (Yan Wang).

by Diana Yue