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 borrowing

利 Pronunciation: li (Putonghua, 4th tone), lei (Cantonese 6th tone)
Basic meaning: sharp, benefit, advantage, gain, interest

利 means sharp/facilitate/benefit: 利刀 (li dao = sharp-knife), 利尿 (li niao = ease/release-urine), 利害 (li hai = advantage-disadvantage = pros and cons), 利益 (li yi = gain-benefit).

利潤 (li run = gain-nourishment = earnings): gross earnings is 毛利 (mao li = hair/surface-gains), net earnings is 純利 (chun li = pure-gains). Banks charge 利息 (li xi = gain-interest = loan interest) and control 利率 (li lu = interest-rate) by 加息 (jia xi = raising-interest) or 減息 (jian xi = lowering-interest). Loan-sharks lend 高利貸 (gao li dai = high-interest-loans).

見利忘義 (jian li wang yi = see-advantage-forget-righteousness) is selfish, unprincipled behaviour. 本小利大 (ben xiao li da = capital-small-earnings-big) is the small businessman’s dream.

by Diana Yue