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 motherhood

母 (mu) (Putonghua, 3rd tone), 莫 (Cantonese 5th tone)
Basic meaning: mother, female

Pronunciation: mu (Putonghua, 3rd tone), mo (Cantonese 5th tone)
Basic meaning: mother, female

母親 (mu qin = maternal-parent) = mother, 母系社會 (mu xi she hui = mother-lineage-society) = matrilineality. 母胎 (mu tai = mother-womb) breeds fetus. 母雞 (mu ji) = female-chicken/hen, 母牛 (mu niu) = female-cattle/cow, 母獅 (mu shi) = lioness.

母校 (mu xiao = mother-school) = alma mater. 母語教學 (mu yu jiao xue = mother-language-teach-learn) means teaching/learning in students’ mother tongue. 母公司 (mu gong si = mother-company = head firm) controls 子公司 (zi gong si = son-company = subsidiaries).

母親節 (mu qin jie = maternal-parent-festival) celebrates 母愛 (mu ai = mother’s-love), but famously “慈母多敗兒” (ci mu duo bai er = loving/indulgent-mothers-usually-[have]-failed-sons = ruin their children).

by Diana Yue