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 children

児  (er)  Pronunciation: er (Putonghua, 2nd tone), yi(Cantonese 4th tone)  Basic meaning: so, child

兒 = son/child. 兒童 (er tong) = child/children. 兒歌 (er ge = children-songs), 兒童節目 (er tong jie mu = children-section-number = children’s programmes). 兒戲 (er xi = child-play/game), however, describes rash/immature conduct.

兒童節 (er tong jie = children-festival) is Children’s Day. 兒科醫生 (er ke yi sheng = child-subject-medicine-man = pediatricians) are examining 嬰幼兒 (ying you er = baby-young-children = infants) harmed by tainted milk. Eurasians are 混血兒 (hun xue er = mixed-blood-children). Hippies are 花朵兒童 (hua duo er tong = flower-blossom-children = Flower Children).

養兒防老 (yang er fang lao = raise-son-guarantee-old-age = children you raised will support you in your old age) is old wisdom, now unreliable.

by Diana Yue