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 animal symbolism

牛 (niu) symbolizes exploited labourers. 黃牛 (huang niu = yellow/brown-oxen), 水牛 (shiu niu = water-buffalo) pull the plough. 種牛 (zhong niu = seed-bulls) mate with 母牛 (mu niu = female-ox = cows). 乳牛 (ru niu = milk-ox = dairy cattle) produce 牛奶 (niu nai = cow-milk).


九牛一毛 (jiu niu yi mao = nine-oxen-one-hair = one hair from nine oxen) means a tiny fraction of huge resources. 老牛破車 (lao niu po che = old-ox-broken-down-cart) describes old China's backward/poor/hurt rural economy.

by Diana Yue