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

馬 symbolizes swift/powerful advance. 馬上 (ma shang = horse-on = on horseback) means immediately. 人強馬壯 (ren qiang ma zhuang = men-powerful-horses-strong) describes a strong army/workforce. 上馬 (shang ma = ascend-horse = mount), 下馬 (xia ma = descend-horse = dismount) also mean launching/scraping projects.

過馬路 (guo ma lu = cross-horse-road) = crossing the (carriage/automobile) street. Horsemen 騎馬 (qi ma = ride-horse), perform 馬術 (ma shu = horse-methods/skills = equestrian arts). 賽馬 (sai ma = race-horses) = horse-racing.

馬上得天 下 (ma shang de tian xia = horse-on-take-sky-below = take the world on horseback) describes great military conquerors. 騎牛揾馬 (qi niu wen ma = ride-ox-seek-horse) describes a dissatisfied lover/employee looking for someone/something better.

by Diana Yue

Pronunciation: ma (Putonghua, 3rd tone), ma (Cantonese 5th tone)
Basic meaning: horse