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

虎 (lao hu = old-tiger) symbolizes regality/ferocity. 虎將 (hu jiang = tiger-general) means formidable general/fighter. 虎山行 (hu shan xing = tiger-mountain-trip = penetrating tiger country) means going ahead despite dangers. However, 馬虎 (ma hu = horse-tiger) means sloppy/un-thorough, 馬馬虎虎 (ma ma hu hu = horse-horse-tiger-tiger) means “not so great”.

虎頭蛇尾 (hu tou she wei = tiger-head-snake-tail) = big start, weak finish. 騎虎難下 (qi hu nan xia = ride-tiger-hard-to-dismount) means caught in a difficult/awkward situation hard to shake off.

虎口餘生 (hu kou yu sheng = tiger-mouth-remain-alive) means fortunately escaping from peril. Pedestrians are warned “馬路如虎口” (ma lu ru hu kou = carriage/automobile-road-like-tiger-mouth) = “Beware of cars!”

by Diana Yue