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

Pronunciation: zhu (Putonghua, 1st tone), jue (Cantonese, 1st tone)  
Basic meaning: pig

Pig symbolizes laziness/stupidity or fat/well-to-do people. 豬農 (zhu nong = pig-farmers) rear pigs in 豬圈 (zhu quan = pig-ring) = pig sty. 殺豬般叫 (sha zhu ban jiao = kill-pig-same-as-yell/scream) means screaming loudly/desperately like pigs being slaughtered.

豬肉 (zhu rou = pig-meat) = pork. 火腿 (huo tui = fire-leg) is ham. Chinatown restaurants sell Hongkong-style 燒肉 (shao rou = burn-meat = roast pork), 叉燒 (cha shao = [Cantonese] cha siu = skewer-burn = barbecue pork).

Contemptible people are 豬狗不如 (zhu gou bu ru = pig-dog-not-good-as = worse than dogs and pigs). Dumb people are 蠢豬 (chun zhu = stupid-pig). “肥豬王” (fei zhu wang = fat-pig-king) is the Chinese title of Orwell’s Animal Farm.

by Diana Yue