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 myths and legends

妖 (radical 女 nu = woman)
Pronunciation: yao (Putonghua, 1st tone), yiu (Cantonese, 2nd tone)
Basic meaning: evil

妖 = evil/evil-being 妖魔 (yao mo = evil-demons), 妖婦 (yao fu = evil-woman/witch), 妖術 (yao shu = evil-methods = black magic).

Plants/animals can 修煉 (xiu lian = practice-burn-refine = do mystical exercises), absorb sun/moon’s 精華 (jing hua = essence-splendour = mystical energy), become精 (jing = non-human beings with human forms). In the novel 西遊記 (Xi You Ji = west-travel-record = Journey To The West), pilgrim monk Tripitaka met/vanquished/converted many 妖精 (yao jing = evil-fairy-beings): 蜘蛛精 (zhi zhu jing = spider-women-fairies), 白骨精 (bai gu jing = white-bone/skeleton-fairy), made 豬精 (zhu jing = pig-fairy) his disciple.

Trans-suegos/“ladyboys” are derogatorily called 人妖 (ren yao = human-evil-fairies). Heretics 妖言惑眾 (yao yan hua zhong = evil-speech-deceive-people).

by Diana Yue