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 zoos

鳥 (niao) = bird

Pronunciation: **niao** (Putonghua, 3rd tone), **niu** (Cantonese, 5th tone)

Basic meaning: bird

鳥 = 雀 (que) = 禽 (qin): 麻雀 (ma que = freckled-bird = sparrow), 家禽 (jia qin = domestic-fowls). 天鵝 (tian e = heavenly~goose = swans), 企鵝 (qi e = standing~goose = penguins) are 水鳥 (shui qin = water~fowls), 雁 (yan = wild~geese) are 候鳥 (hou niao = seasonal/migratory-birds). Soaring 鵬 (peng = mythological roc) commands 鳥瞰 (niao kan = bird’s~eye~view).

羽翼未豐 (yu yi wei feng = feathers~wings~not-yet-full) describes 雛鳥 (chu niao = baby~bird = fledglings) or not-yet~powerful would-be leaders.

鷹 (ying = eagle) symbolizes majesty, 鴿 (ge, dove) peace, 鴛鴦 (yuan yang = mandarin ducks) marital bliss. Chinese literature 以鳥鳴春 (yi niao ming chun = with~birds~sound~spring = uses birdsong to represent springtime).

by Diana Yue