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 dressmaking

裁 (radical 衣 yi = clothes)
Pronunciation: cai (Putonghua, 4th tone), choi (Cantonese, 3rd tone)
Basic meaning: design/cut sewing pattern, cut

裁縫 (cai feng = make-pattern-sew = tailor/dressmakers) draw/cut 紙樣 (zhi yang = paper-shape = clothing patterns) showing 領 (ling = collar), 袖 (xiu = sleeves), 肩 (jian = shoulders), 腰 (yao = waist), 襯 (zhe = folds/pleats/seams); cut 布料 (bu liao = cloth-materials = fabrics) with 剪刀 (jian dao = cut-knife = scissors). 相體裁衣 (xiang ti cai yi = assess-body-cut-dress) means planning to meet needs/resources/trends.

剪裁 (jian cai = cut-pattern = cutting) of 高級時裝 (gao ji shi zhuang = high-class-season-clothes = high fashion = haute couture) is more body-flattering than 成衣 (cheng yi = made-clothes = ready-to-wear garments = prêt-a-porter).

裁員 (cai yuan = cut-member) = corporate downsizing. 裁軍 (cai jun = cut-army) = disarmament.

by Diana Yue