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

Anglers 釣魚 (diao yu = dangle-hook-fish), fishermen 捕魚 (bu yu = trap/catch-fish). 鰻 (man, eel), 鯖 (qing, mackerel), 比目魚 (bi mu yu = pair-eyes-fish = flatfish), 石斑 (shi ban = stone-patches = garoupa) make delicious dishes. 魚米之鄉 (yu mi zhi xiang = fish-rice-’s-land) are rice-and-fish-rich regions.

鯨 (jing, whale), 鯊 (sha, shark), 海豚 (hai tun = sea-pig = dolphins), 金魚 (jin yu = gold-fish), 美人魚 (mei ren yu = beautiful-person-fish = mermaids) inspire art/literature.

Asked “子非魚, 安知魚之樂?” (zi fei yu, an zhi yu zhi le? = You-are-not-fish, how-know-fish-’s-happiness?), philosopher 莊子 (Zhuang-zi) replied, “You’re not I, how do you know that I don’t know the fish are happy?”

by Diana Yue