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: hou (Putonghua, 2nd tone), hau (Cantonese, 4th tone)
Basic meaning: monkey

猴 (radical 犭 = 狗 = dog/animal) = 猴子 (hou zi = monkey-diminutive). 猿猴 (yuan hou = gibbons-monkeys), like 猩猩 (hei xing xing = apes/chimps/gorillas), 人 (ren = humans), are靈長目動物 (ling zhang mu dong wu = intelligence-top-type-animals = primates).

猴 symbolizes intelligence/playfulness. In 西遊記 (xi you ji = west-travel-record = novel Journey to the West), Monkey King 孫悟空 (Sun Wu Kong) escorted 唐三藏 (tang san zang = Tang-Dynasty-[Monk]-Tripitaka) to India, conquering demons all the way, and brought back 佛經 (fo jing = Buddhist sutras/scriptures).

猴急 (hou ji = monkey-impatient) means cannot wait, eager to grab. 樹倒猢猻散 (shu dao hu sun san = tree-falls-macaques/monkeys-scatter) describes dependents abandoning toppled leader/regime.

by Diana Yue