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 bureaucrats

清 = 清潔 (qing jie = clear-clean/clean-up). Morning air is 清新 (qing xin = clean-new = fresh). We see/think 清楚 (qing chu = clear-clear = clearly) when 清醒 (qing xing = clear-awake = sober). Messy rooms need 清理 (qing li = clean-up-arrange = tidying).

Virtuous/high-minded people are 清高 (qing gao = clean/pure-high). 清官 (qing guan = clean-officials) means un腐 combating officials, but 清官難審家庭事 (qing guan nan shen jia ting shi = clean-official-difficult-adjudicate-family-courtyard-affairs = even unbiased judicial opinion cannot clarify/pacify family arguments/ quarrels).

Accused of lying/corruption/treachery, we plead “清者自清!” (qing zhe zi qing = “Clean/innocent-person-remain-naturally-clean/innocent!”) Ironically, 水清無魚 (shui qing wu yu = water-clean-no-fish = bacteria/ graft-free places cannot nurture robust growth/activities.

by Diana Yue