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 plant symbolism

蓮 = 荷 (he). Summer is the season of white/pink/red 荷花 (he hua = lotus-flowers) and 睡蓮 (shui lian = sleeping-lotus = Monet’s water-lilies). Chinese cuisine uses 蓮藕 (lian ou = lotus-roots), 蓮子 (lian zi = lotus-seeds). 荷葉飯 (he ye fan = lotus-leaf-wrapped-rice) is a delicacy.

蓮 symbolizes spiritual purity and 君子 (jun zi = benevolent and righteous man/gentleman). The Buddhist deity 觀音 (guan yin = Guanyin /Avalokitesvara) sits/stands on a 蓮座 (lian zuo = lotus-seat).

Chinese New Year pictures titled “蓮年有魚” (lian nian you yu = lotus-year-has-fish) show lotus-flowers with swimming fish. Pronunciation-wise, 蓮 = 連 (lian= continuous), 魚 (yu = fish) = 餘 (yu = extra/abundant), so the theme is “many years of abundance/prosperity”.

Pronunciation: lian (Putonghua, 2nd tone), lin (Cantonese 4th tone)
Basic meaning: lotus