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

竹 = 竹子 (zhu zi = bamboo-diminutive) = bamboo.

竹林 (zhu lin) = bamboo grove. Chinese cuisine uses 竹筍 (zhu sun = bamboo-young-shoot).

We use 竹筷 (zhu kuai = bamboo-chopsticks), 竹簾 (zhu lian = bamboo-blinds), 竹籬 (zhu li = bamboo-fence). Builders in Hong Kong use 竹棚 (zhu peng = bamboo-scaffolding). Overseas-born Chinese living in ghettos are called 竹升 (zhu sheng = bamboo-pole): like a section of bamboo with both ends blocked, they are cut off from both local culture and Chinese culture.

竹 grows fast and symbolizes academic/career ascent. Students all know the motto “百尺竿頭,更進一步” (bai che gan tou, geng jin yi bu = hundred-feet-bamboo-pole-tip, further-advance-one-step), i.e. do even better.

by Diana Yue