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

梅 (mei) (Putonghua, 2nd tone), mooi (Cantonese 4th tone)
Basic meaning: through, leading to, linking

梅, China’s 国花 (guo hua = state-flower), is described as 暗香疏影 (an xiang shu ying = hidden/secret-fragrance-sparse-shadow/silhouette). 梅林 (mei lin) = plum grove. 盆梅 (pan mei = pot-plum) = potted miniature plum-tree.

踏雪尋梅 (ta xue xun mei = step-snow-search-plum) means snow-hiking to see plum-trees in bloom. 黃梅天氣 (huang mei tian qi = yellow-plum-sky-breath) means humid spring-summer weather. 梅雨 (mei yu = plum-rain) = spring-summer drizzles.

梅花宴 (mei hua yan = plum-blossom-banquet) are frugal official dinners: soup and five dishes arranged like a five-petalled plum-bossom. 梅子鴨 (mei zi ya = plum-diminutive-duck) = duck stewed with plums. 酢梅湯 (suan mei tang = sour-plum-soup) is sugared plum juice, a cold summer drink.

by Diana Yue