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


Eye-catching pine trees in tourist spots are called 迎客松 (ying ke song = welcome-guest-pines). 松濤 (song tao = pine-wave/surf) is the whirring of wind passing through pine trees. 松脂 (song zhi = pine-fat/grease = resin) drips to form honey-coloured 華珀 (hu po = amber).

松 and 柏 (bo = cypress) are evergreens, so we wish old people “老如松柏” (lao ru song bo = old-as-pine-cypress), i.e. longevity.

by Diana Yue