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 zis together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

This week: Words about colours

黑 describes 黑種人 (hei zhong ren = black-species people = negroes). 墨黑 (mo hei = ink-black), 漆黑 (qi hei = tar/jet-black) mean total blackness/darkness. 黑夜 (he ye = black-night) = dark/deep night. 黑暗 (hei an = black-dark/unlit) describes corrupt/evil environments. Chinese 三合會 (san he hui = three-joined-society = “triad societies”) are 黑社會 (hei she hui = black-community-society = illegal/underground gangster groups).

黑著臉 (hei zhuo lian = black-ing-face) describes a harsh/ominous facial expression. 頭頭碰著黑 (tou tou peng zhuo hei = head-head-clash-with-black) means having ill-luck everywhere. Evil-doers are 黑心 (hei xin = black-hearted). 厚黑學 (hou hei xue = thick-black-ism), a selfish philosophy, advocates unblushing (“thick face-skin”) cruel (“black-hearted”) behaviour to others.

by Diana Yue