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 colours

白 = 白色 (bai se = white-colour): 白種人 (bai zhong ren = white-species-people = whites), 白髮 (bai fa = white-hair), 白雲 (bai yun = white-clouds), 白酒 (bai jiu = white-wine). 蒼白 (cang bai = wan/bloodless-white) describes a pale face. The White House is 白宮 (bai gong = white-palace).

Washing needs 漂白 (piao bai = bleach-white = bleaching). 留白 (liu bai = preserve-white = leaving some areas blank) in Chinese painting lets viewers’ imagination work.

白紙黑字 (bai zhi hei zi = white-paper-black-words) means clearly written down, i.e. unmistakable/undeniable. Confusing right with wrong is 黑白不分 (hei bai bu fen = black-white-no-distinguish). A defendant found not guilty is 清白 (qing bai = clean-white = clean/innocent).

Pronunciation: bai (Putonghua, 2^{nd} tone), baak (Cantonese 6^{th} tone)
Basic meaning: white

by Diana Yue