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

黃

Pronunciation: huang (Putonghua, 2nd tone), wong (Cantonese 4th tone)
Basic meaning: yellow

黃 means yellow/brown: 嫩黃 (nen huang = soft-yellow), 金黃 (jin huang = golden/glittering-yellow). China’s 黃河 (Huang He = Yellow-River) is 泥黃 (ni huang = muddy-yellow).

黃蜂 (huang feng = yellow-bee) = wasp. 蛋黃 (dan huang = egg-yellow) = egg yolk. 黃金 (huang jin = yellow-gold) is gold. 黃燈 (huang deng = yellow-light) = amber/wait signal. 面如黃臘 (mian ru huang la = face-like-yellow-wax) means dried-up, sickly countenance.

人約黃昏後 (ren yue huang hun hou = people-dating-yellow-dark-after, 黃昏: evening) = lovers’sevening rendezvous. On one occasion in Chinese history, a general was 黃袍加身 (huang pao jia shen = yellow-robe-put-on-body, 黃袍: imperial robe), i.e. coerced by supporters to become Emperor.

by Diana Yue