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

紫 (zi jing = purple-crystal) = amethyst. 紫貂 (zi diao = purple-sable) = sable fur. Hardwood 紫檀 (zi tan = purple-sandalwood) furniture is expensive/rare. 紫河車 (zi he che = purple-river-cart) is dried human placenta, used in Chinese medicine.

Ultra-violet rays = 紫外線 (zi wai xian = purple-external-lines/rays). 紫 (hong de fa zi = so red it looks purple) describes stars/singers' stunning popularity.

by Diana Yue