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 foreign countries

紅 = red: 紅日 (hong re = red-sun), 紅酒 (hong jiu = red-wine). 臉紅 (lian hong = face-red) = blush. 紅樹林 (hong shu lin = red-tree-grove) = mangrove forests. 紅燈 (hong deng = red-light) = red/stop/danger signal.

Cash gifts/bribes are 紅包 (hong bao = red-packets). 紅白二事 (hong bai er shi = red-white-two-things/events) means weddings/birthdays and funerals. 紅 also symbolizes socialist/communist China: 紅軍 (hong jun = Red-Army), 紅衛兵 (hong wei bing = red-guard-soldier = Red Guards). 又紅又專 (you hong you zhuan = also-red-also-specialized) means politically correct and professionally sound.

看破紅塵 (kan po hong chen = see-break/through-red-dust, 紅塵: world’s vanities) means disillusioned about life and desiring to become hermit/monk/nun.

by Diana Yue