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 sleep

(radical 禾 he = rice plant)

Pronunciation: zhong (Putonghua, 4th tone, noun 3rd tone), jung (Cantonese, 2nd tone)
Basic meaning: plant (verb), seed (noun)

Chinese mythology says the god 神農氏 (Shen Nong Shi = “god-farmer-sire”) taught man how to 種植 (zhong zhi = sow-seed-plant): using 種子 (zhong zi = seed-diminutive = seeds) to 種田 (zhong tian = planting-crops-in-fields), 植林 (zhi lin = planting-woods/forests).

Noun 種 means male sperms. 種牛 (zhong niu = seed-ox) = seed bulls. 有种 (you zhong = has-seed) describes someone with guts, 没种 (mei zhong = no-has-seed) describes cowards. Bastards are 孽种 (nie zhong = sin-seed).

種下禍根 (zhong xia huo gen = plant-down- mis-fortune-root) means doing something which would breed future harm. 種瓜得瓜, 種豆得豆 (zhong gua de gua, zhong dou de dou = plant-gourd-obtain-gourd, plant-beans-obtain-beans) means “You reap what you sow”.

by Diana Yue