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 race

祖 = 祖宗 (zu zong = ancestral-origin/head).

Legendarily, 黃帝 (Huang Di = Yellow Emperor) is Chinese people’s 始祖 (shi zu = beginning-founder/ancestor).

祖國 (zu guo = ancestor-country) = motherland.

祖籍 (zu ji = ancestor-native-identity) = native place/province/region.

祖父母 (zu fu mu = ancestor-father-mother) = grandparents.

Traditionally, Chinese clans/families 拜祖先 (bai zu xian = worship-ancestors-predecessors), visit ancestral tombs/shrines/temples to 祭祖 (ji zu = offer-sacrifices-to-ancestors), keep 祖先靈位 (zu xian ling wei = ancestors-spirit-seat/place = plaque representing ancestors-presence) at home.

Successful people “光宗耀祖!” (guang zong rao zu = bright-origin-glorious-ancestors = “enhance family’s fame/honor!”) Bad/failed offsprings are “不肖子孫!” (bu xiao zi sun = not-resemble-sons-grandchildren = “no comparison to ancestors!”).

by Diana Yue