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 fruit

香 (xiāng)

Pronunciation: xiāng (Putonghua, 1st tone), heung (Cantonese, 1st tone)

Basic meaning: fragrance, incense, joss-sticks

Flowers/fruit emit 香氣 (xiāng qì = fragrant-smell). 香蕉 (xiāng jiāo = bananas) have 香味 (xiāng wèi = nice/delicious-taste). Chefs use 香草 (xiāng cáo = fragrant-grass = herbs), 香料 (xiāng liào = fragrant-materials = spices). We smoke 香煙 (xiāng yān = fragrant-smoke = cigarettes), drink 香檳 (xiāng bīn = “champagne”-transliterated).

香水 (xiāng shuǐ = fragrant-water = perfumes/colognes) fake 體香 (ti xìāng = body-fragrance), conceal 體臭 (ti chōu = body-bad-smell = body odor). Euphemistically, 倒夜香 (dào yè xiāng = pour-night-fragrance) means disposing of night soil in pre-water-closet days.

At shrines pilgrims 上香 (shàng xiāng = up/offer-incense/joss-sticks). Historians say Hong Kong’s Chinese name “香港” (Xiang Gang = fragrant-harbour or joss-sticks-harbour) reflects Hong Kong once produced/exported joss-sticks.

by Diana Yue