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 slavery


林肯 (Lin Keng = "Lincoln"-transliterated) 解放黑奴 (jie fang hei nu = untie-free-black-slaves = liberated slaves). The Chinese Communists fought 解放战争 (jie fang zhan zheng = untie-free-war-conflict = war of liberation) against the Kuomintang.

To pessimists, death is 大解脱 (da jie tuo = big-release-escape = the ultimate liberation). However, in classical Chinese 大解 (da jie = big-solution) means stooling, 小解 (xiao jie = small-solution) means urinating.

by Diana Yue