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 Easter

贖 means buying back. Broke, we 典當 (dian dang = mortgage-pawn) valuables to pawnshops, consoling ourselves: “有當有贖, 上等之人” (you dang you shu, shang deng zhi ren = has-pawn-has-redeem, high-class’s-person = I pawn then buy back, it’s perfectly respectable).

Liberators pay for 奴隸 (nu li = slave-servants), 妓女 (ji nu = prostitute-women) to 贖身 (shu shen = redeem-body = buy out, set free). Kidnappers demand 賄金 (shu jin = redeem-gold/money = ransom), threatening 撕票 (si piao = tear-ticket = kill the kidnapped person).

Christianity preaches 罪人 (zui ren = sin-person = sinners) need 救贖 (jiu shu = salvation-redemption). The medieval church sold 贖罪券 (shu zui juan = redeem-sin-tickets = indulgences).

by Diana Yue