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 staple foods

餓 = 饥 (e) means hungry, 饥餓 (ji e) means hunger. During 饥荒 (ji huang = hunger-bad-harvest = famine), 饥民 (ji min = hungry-people = famine victims) 饥死 (e si = hungry-die = die of hunger).

When feeling 饥腸轆轆 (ji chang lu lu = hungry-intestines-wheel-grinding-sound), we 飢不擇食 (ji bu ze shi = hungry-no-choose-food = eat whatever is available). 饥肚子 (e du zi = hungry-belly) means going without food. 絕食 (jue shi = end-eat) means going on hunger strike.

During a famine, an ignorant emperor said “天下饑, 何不食肉糜?” (tian xia ji, he bu shi rou mi? = sky-under-famine, why-not-eat-meat-gruel? = Why don’t our famished people eat meat porridge?)

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