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 recessions

衰 Pronunciation: shuai (Putonghua, 1st tone), sui (Cantonese, 1st tone) Basic meaning: decline

衰 is opposite of 盛 (sheng = prosperous). Empires 由盛而衰 (you sheng er shuai = from-prosperous-then-decline). Philosophers say everything 盛極必衰 (sheng ji bi shuai = prosper-peak-surely-decline).

Illnesses make bodies 衰弱 (shuai ruo = deteriorate-weak). As bodies'/organs'衰老 (shuai lao = deteriorating-with-age), physical/mental abilities 衰退 (shuai tui = decline-recede = deteriorate).

經濟 (jing ji = planning-irrigation) = the economy. During 經濟衰退 (jing ji shuai tui = economic-decline/recede = recession), 百業蕭條 (bai ye xiao tiao = hundred-trades/businesses-cold/neglected = all businesses are depressed). 大蕭條 (da xiao tiao = big-cold/depressed) = the 1929 Great Depression.

Cantonese call someone “衰鬼!” (sui gwai = Putonghua shuai gui = bad ghost) for non-serious cheeky rebuke.

by Diana Yue