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 sleep

枕 (zhēn tou = pillow-head = pillow), 枕頭套 (zhēn tou tao = pillow-wrap-over = pillow-case). Ancient Chinese used 瓷枕 (cí zhēn = porcelain-head-rests), 硬枕 (yǐng zhēn = hard-pillows). Today we prefer 羽絨枕 (yù róng zhēn = feather-down-pillows = down pillows), 軟枕 (ruǎn zhēn = soft-pillows). 繡枕 (xiù zhēn = embroidery-pillow) are embroidered pillow-cases.

枕木 (zhēn mu = pillow-wood = sleepers) are used on 路軌 (lù guǐ = road-track = tracks) of 鐵路 (t ie lü = iron-road = railways).

枕臂談心 (zhēn bì tán xīn = use-as-pillow-arm-talk-heart) describes intimate chat between friends resting against each other’s arm. 枕戈待旦 (zhēn ge dāi dān = pillow-spear-wait-dawn) describes warriors, weapons-ready, waiting round-the-clock for action at daybreak.