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

鎖 (radical 金 jin = gold/metal) = lock. Before going out we insert 鎖匙 (suo shi = lock-key) into 門鎖 (men suo = door-lock) to make the door 上鎖 (shang suo = up-lock = locked). 鎖匠 (suo jiang = lock-workman = locksmiths) know skills for 開鎖 (kai suo = opening-locks).

鎖鏈 (suo lian = lock-chain) means chain with lock. Prisoners/slaves wear 枷鎖 (jia suo = yoke-locked-chain = yoke and chains). But they seek freedom, 鎖不住 (suo bu zu = lock-not-stay/steady = cannot be confined).

Snipers 鎖定目標 (suo ding mu biao = lock-fix-eye-target = fix on the target), then open fire. Inward-looking rulers implement 鎖國政策 (suo guo zheng ce = lock-state-political-plan = closed-door policy).

by Diana Yue