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 race

語 = 語言 (yu yan, speech-words = 語文 yu wen, speech-writing = language) has 語音 (yu yin = speech-sounds), 語法 (yu fa = language-rules = grammar), 語意 (yu yi = words’meaning). 文字 (wen zi = inscription-characters) = writing script.

China achieved 書同文 (shu tong wen = book/writing-same-inscription = unified writing script) two millennia ago. Many 方言 (fang yan = 地方語言, di fang yu yan = land-square/place-speech-words = regional dialects) are spoken. 漢語 (Han yu = Han-Chinese) is now the 共同語 (gong tong yu = share-same-language = common language).

外語 (wai yu = outside-speech) = foreign languages. 烏語 (niao yu = bird-words) means birdsong. 語塞 (yu sai = word-blocked/stuck) means dumbfounded.

by Diana Yue