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 death

魂
(radical 手 gui = ghost)
Pronunciation: hun (Putonghua, 2nd tone), wan (Cantonese, 4th tone)
Basic meaning: spirit, soul


Elegies mourn/praise 忠魂 (zhong hun = patriotic-souls), 英魂 (ying hun = heroic/brave-souls), 香魂 (xiang hun = fragrant-souls = lovely women).
“Requiem” is translated as 安魂曲 (an hun qu = pacify-souls-musical/vocal-work).

無主孤魂 (wu zhu gu hun = without-master-orphan-spirit = lost soul) describes someone lacking purpose/guidance/group-support. 失魂落魄 (shi hun luo po = lost-spirit-dropped-wits) means shocked/scared out of one’s wits. Absent-minded persons are jokingly called “失魂魚!” (shi hun yu = lost-spirit/wits-fish).

by Diana Yue