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

(radical 米 mi = rice grain)

穀物 (gu wu = grain-things = grain crops) yield 糧 (= 糧食 liang shi = grain-for-eating): 大米 (da mi = big-rice = rice), 小米 (xiao mi = small-rice = millet), 大麥 (da mai = big-wheat = barley), 小麥 (xiao mai = small-wheat = wheat), 玉米 (yu mi = jade-rice = maize/corn).

During 糧荒 (liang huang = grain-shortage), governments issue 糧票 (liang piao = grain-tickets = food-rationing coupons) for buying 糧油 (liang you = grain-cooking-oil).

In bad times bosses may still 出糧 (chu liang = out-grain = issue wages/salary) to employees, but not 雙糧 (shuang liang = double-pay). Mindless spenders 寅吃卯糧 (yin chi mao liang = “yin”-year-eat-“mao”-following-year-grain = spend future income/savings) - and eventually get broke!

by Diana Yue