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

哀 = sorrow/grief: poor man’s 悲哀 (bei ai = sadness-sorrow), sentimentalist's 哀愁 (ai qiu = sorrow-dejection), debtor’s 哀求 (ai qiu = desperate-begging), banished patriot's 哀歌 (ai ge = desperate-stricken-song = lamentations). 哀莫大於心死 (ai mo da yu xin si = sorrow-no-more-greater-than-heart-dead) = loss of heart/hope/dreams is the greatest tragedy.

哀鴻遍地 (ai hong bian di = sorrowful-birds/refugees-all-over-land) describes war/famine victims wandering/crying everywhere. Survivors 哀悼 (ai dao = sorrowfully-mourn) soldiers killed. War strategists say 哀兵必勝 (ai bing bi sheng = mourning-army-certain-win = grief-boosted, we shall overcome).

Mourning family 哀泣 (ai qi = bitterly/painfully-weep). We console them: “節哀順變!” (jie ai shun bian = limit-sorrow-follow/accept-change = get over it, look ahead).

Pronunciation: ai (Putonghua, 1st tone), oi (Cantonese, 1st tone)
Basic meaning: bitter sorrow, mourn, mourning, mournful

by Diana Yue