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 \(\uparrow = \text{心} \; \text{xin} = \text{heart}\))

Pronunciation: \(\text{yì} \) (Putonghua, 4\(^{\text{th}}\) tone), \(\text{yik} \) (Cantonese, 1\(^{\text{st}}\) tone)

Basic meaning: remember, reminisce, reminiscences

憶 = 記憶 (\(\text{ji yi} = \text{memorize-remember}\)) = 回憶 (\(\text{hui yi} = \text{go-back-remember = reminisce}\)). Memory is 記憶力 (\(\text{ji yi li} = \text{remember-power}\)). 回憶錄 (\(\text{hui yi lu} = \text{go-back-remember-records}\)) means memoirs.

Oldies 憶童年 (\(\text{yi tong nian} = \text{remember-child-years = reminisce on childhood days}\)), 憶亡友 (\(\text{yi wang you} = \text{remember/miss-dead-friends}\)). On 紀念日 (\(\text{ji nian ri} = \text{commemorate-remember-day = anniversaries}\)) we 追憶 (\(\text{zui yi} = \text{trail/chase-remember = think about}\)) past events. 歷史 (\(\text{li shi} = \text{experience-record = history}\)) contains a nation’s 集體記憶 (\(\text{ji ti ji yi} = \text{collect-body/group-memorize-remember = collective memory}\)).

Chinese government asks Tibetans to 憶苦思甜 (\(\text{yi ku si tian} = \text{remember-bitterness-think-about-sweetness = compare the bitter past with today’s improvements}\)).

by Diana Yue