

Character Builder 您好嗎？

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.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each *zi* is pronounced in one of four tones:

1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4th tone: 4 = diacritical mark \ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest)

To pronounce each *zi* below, follow its pinyin and the given tone number. Light-sound words, which have no definite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about the civil wars

Putonghua pronunciation: *lie4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *lit6*

Meanings: split up, crack, cracked, tom

裂 (radical 衣 *yi1*, clothes) means crack/split: 裂縫 (*lie4 feng2* = crack~seam = fissure), 爆裂 (*bao4 lie4* = burst~open). Ripe fruit 裂開 (*lie4 kai1* = splits~open), shows 裂口 (*lie4 kou3* = crack~mouth = split opening). 聲如裂帛 (*sheng1 ru2 lie4 bo2* = sound~resembling~torn/rended~silk) describes shrill, stunning sound of singing or lute chord. 核裂變 (*he2 lie4 bian4* = nucleus~split~change) = nuclear fission.

Spoilt friendship has 裂痕 (*lie4 hen2* = crack~trace = crack-line/scar). Couple 決裂 (*jue2 lie4* = breaks~splits), 割裂 (*ge1 lie4* = cut~break = severs) relationship. Disagreement makes parliament 分裂 (*fen1 lie4* = split~crack = split).

War breaks out when 停火談判破裂 (*ting2 huo3 tan2 pan4 po4 lie4* = stop~fire~talk~decision~break~crack = cease-fire talks fail).

by Diana Yue