

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: **can3**

Cantonese pronunciation: **chaam2**

Meanings: cruel, painful, pathetic, pitiful, tragic, terrible

慘 (radical ↑ = 心 **xin1**, heart) describes cruelty inflicting great pain/grief: 慘烈 (**can3 lie4** = cruel~violent/fierce) battle, 慘痛 (**can3 tong4** = cruel~painful) experience, 悲慘 (**bei1 can3** = tragic~cruel) fate. Bankrupt businessman 叫慘 (**jiao4 can3** = scream/yell~tragic = groans/complains), 慘笑 (**can3 xiao4** = painfully~grins/hisses): “輸慘了!” (**shu1 can3 le0** = “Lost~tragically!”)

Campus-shooting is 慘案 (**can3 an4** = cruel/terrible/tragic~case/incident). War-crimes are 慘無人道 (**can3 wu2 ren2 dao4** = cruel-no-human-way = cruel/inhumane): tortured prisoners 慘叫 (**can3 jiao4** = painfully~scream), deaths are 慘不忍睹 (**can3 bu4 ren3 du3** = cruel/pitiful-no-stand~see = terrible/tragic sights).

In civil war, losers suffer 慘敗 (**can3 bai4** = terrible~defeat), but winners only 慘勝 (**can3 sheng4** = terrible~victory = win at terrible costs).

by Diana Yue