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 Buddha's sacrifice for eagle and dove

**死**

Cantonese pronunciation: *si2*
Meanings: die, death

死 = die/death: 死去(*si3 qu4* = die-gone = die), 死亡(*si3 wangi = death-extinction), 死屍(*si3 shi1* = dead-corpse). Requiem mourns 死者(*si3 zhe3* = die-person = the dead).

死士(*si3 shi4* = die-soldier/worker = volunteers prepared to risk/sacrifice life) believe 生死有命(*sheng1 si3 you3 ming4* = life-death-has-fate = keeping/losing life is predestined).

食物鏈(*shi2 wu4 lian4* = eat-things-chain = food chain), 鷹(*ying1*, eagle) eats 鴿(*ge1*, dove) to live. Buddha 救度眾生(*jiu4 du4 zhong4 sheng1* = save-transfer/deliver-many/all-lives = redeems all living creatures), offered to 代鴿受死(*dai4 ge1 shou4 si3* = substitute-dove-receive-death = die in dove’s stead). Indra spared dove, moved by Buddha’s 慈悲(*ci2 bei1* = kindness-grief= mercy).

by Diana Yue