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 funerals

泣 (radical 氵 = water shui3, water) means shedding tears, tears or weeping/crying softly: 哭泣 (ku1 qi4 = cry-weep), 泣 (ti4 qi4 = nose-fluid tears = shed tears and blow nose).

Visitor and prisoner 泣別 (qi4 bie2 = weep-depart = take leave shedding tears). 牛衣對泣 (niu2 yi1 dui4 qi4 = cattle’s-straw cloak-facing-weep) describes impoverished couple with no way out grieving together.

Air-crash victim’s widow 抽泣 (chou1 qi4 = pull-weep = weeps/sobs chokingly), 泣血 (qi1 xue3 = weep-blood = weeps noiselessly as if bleeding noiselessly, or weeps so hard her eyes ooze blood), orphans 泣不成声 (qi4 bu4 cheng2 sheng1 = weep-no-form-sound = weep and can’t say anything). Watching them, relatives 泣下 (qi4 xia4 = tears fall = shed tears).

by Diana Yue