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 missing persons

Putonghua pronunciation: mie4
Cantonese pronunciation: mit6
Meanings: extinguish, exterminate, extinct

滅 (radical 水 = water shui3, water) means extinct/die: swimmer 滅頂 (mie4 ding3 = extinguish-top/head = sinks, drowns), candle吹滅 (chui1 mie4 = is-blown-out), earthquake victims 滅亡 (mie4 wang2 = extinct-die = perish).


滅門 (mie4 men2 = destroy-door/clan) = entire family killed. 滅族 (mie4 zu3 = destroy-tribe) = genocide. 秦滅六國 (Qin2 mie4 liu4 guo2 = Qin-State-eliminated-six-other-states), unified China. Poet sighs: Ancient civilizations 灰飛煙滅 (hui1 fei1 yan1 mie4 = ashes-fly-smoke-extinguished = went to dust!)

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