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 political parties

敗
Putonghua pronunciation: bai4
Cantonese pronunciation: baa16
Meanings: weaken, undermine, harm, overcome, defeat

Transitive verb 敗 = 敗壞 (bai4 huai4 = weaken-harm). Bad son 敗家 (bai4 jia1 = weaken/harm-family = squanders family fortune, ruins family’s reputation). Winner 打敗 (da3 bai4 = beat-defeat = overcomes) opponent.

Intransitive verb 敗 = 失敗 (shi1 bai4 = loss-defeat/failure). 一敗塗地 (yi1 bai4 tu2 di4 = one-defeat-messy-ground) describes utterly failed attempt/action. In China’s Civil War (1946-49), 國民黨 (guo2 min2 dang3 = state-people-party = Nationalist Party) 吃敗仗 (chi1 bai4 zhang4 = eat-fail-battle = lost battle), 兵敗如山倒 (bing1 bai4 ru2 shan1 dao3 = army-defeat- resemble-mountain-collapse = suffered wave of lop-sided military defeats).

鬥敗的公雞 (dou4 bai4 de0 gong1 ji1 = combat-defeated-’s-male-chicken = rooster defeated in cock-fight) describes downtrodden person’s shaken, upset look.

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