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 mass shootings

赦
Putonghua pronunciation: she4
Cantonese pronunciation: se3
Meanings: pardon, spare from punishment

赦 means 赦免 (she4 mian3 = pardon-spare), where 免 (mian3) means exempt/spare from: 免費 (mian3 fei4 = exempt-fares = free-of-charge) tickets, 免税 (mian3 shui4 = exempt-tax = tax-free) haven. Illegal immigrants wait for 大赦 (da4 she4 = big/large-scale-pardon = amnesty).

Benevolent ruler 寬恕 (kuan1 shu4 = broad/generous-forgive = forgives) rebels, issues 特赦令 (te4 she4 ling4 = special-pardon-order = special pardon) to political prisoners. Harsh ruler says: “殺無赦!” (sha1 wu2 she4 = “Kill them off! No pardon!”)

Mass-shooting gunman 犯罪 (fan4 zui4 = commits-crime/sin), pleads authorities to 赦罪 (she4 zui4 = pardon-crime = grant pardon). Verdict rules: “罪無可赦!” (zui4 wu2 ke3 she4 = crime-none-can-spare = “This crime is unpardonable!”)

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