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 Jesus' crucifixion

Putonghua pronunciation: xing2
Cantonese pronunciation: ying4
Meanings: punishment, penalty, torture

Character 刑 shows 井 (jing3, water-well) guarded by 刀 (dao1, knife), implying torture/punishment for invader. Imperial China's刑部 (xing2 bu4 = punishment-bureau = Ministry of Punishments) implemented刑法 (xing2 fa3 = penal-law/code), imposed刑罰 (xing2 fa3 = punishments-penalities). 刑警 (xing2 jing3 = criminal-offence-investigations-police) = police. Judge判刑 (pan4 xing2 = decides-on-punishment-sentence), announces刑期 (xing2 qi1 = prison-term). Convict服刑 (fu2 xing2 = serves-sentence). 三K黨 (san1 kei1 dang3 = three-Ks-party = the Ku Klux Klan) used刑具 (xing2 jü4 = torture-instruments) to conduct私刑 (si1 xing2 = private/illegal-torture/execution = lynching).

Jesus was taken to Golgotha for行刑 (xing2 xing2 = performing/execution of sentence). 極刑 (ji2 xing2 = ultimate/capital-punishment) means死刑 (si3 xing2 = death-sentence).

by Diana Yue