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 warlords**

割 = 切割 (qie1 ge1 = incise/cut-cut/sever with knife). Farmer 收割 (shou1 ge1 = collect-cut = reaps) harvest. Butcher 割肉 (ge1 rou4 = cuts/chops-meat). Surgeon 割去 (ge1 qu4 = cut-away = removes) patient’s appendix. 割腕 (ge1 wan3 = cut-wrist) is suicidal act.

 Estranged friends 割席 (ge1 xi2 = cut-bed = separate, keep distance), 割斷 (ge1 duan4 = sever-break) links/ties. 割愛 (ge1 ai4 = cut-love) = reluctantly give one’s beloved person/thing to another. Humiliated nation 割讓 (ge1 rang4 = cut-yield = cedes) territory to invaders. 心如刀割 (xin1 ru2 dao4 ge1 = heart-resemble-knife-cut) = feel heartbroken/shattered.

National army’s 1926-8 Northern Expedition ended warlords’ 軍事割據 (jün1 shi4 ge1 jü4 = military-affairs-cut/carve-possess = military occupations) and unified China.

by Diana Yue