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 quarrelling

Putonghua pronunciation: nao4
Cantonese pronunciation: naau6
Meanings: noisy, clamour, disturbance, discord, quarrel, row, suffer from, stir up

顛 (dou4, fight/compete + 市 shi4, market) means noisy/bustling/disturbing. Visitors tour 鬧市 (nao4 shi4 = noisy-market = busy downtown), 看熱顛 (kan4 re4 nao4 = see-hot-noisy = watch the fun/crowds). 顛鐘 (nao4 zhong1 = make-noise-clock) = alarm clock.

Hooligans 鬭事 (nao4 shi4 = raise/create-things/scenes/trouble). Couple 吵顛 (chao3 nao4 = shout-quarrel), 鬭離婚 (nao4 li2 hun1 = yell/yap-separate-marriage = clamour about divorce).

Clumsy fools 鬭笑話 (nao4 xiao4 hua4 = raise/create-laugh-talk = make themselves laughing stocks).

Politicians 鬭意見 (nao4 yi4 jian4 = quarrel-idea-opinion = sulk), making government dysfunction. Critics condemn 鬭劇 (nao4 jü2 = noisy/outrageous-drama = farce): 胡顛! (hu2 nao4 = barbaric/unruly-disturbing = ridiculous/outrageous!)

Underclass 鬭革命 (nao4 ge2 ming4 = clamour-change-fate = rallies revolution).

by Diana Yue