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

惡 (radical 心 xin1, heart) = bad/ill-intentioned; 惡劣 (e4 lüe4 = bad-poor) weather/behavior, 惡夢 (e4 meng4 = bad-dream = nightmare), 惡習 (e4 xi2 = bad-habit/vice). 惡性腫瘤 (e4 xing4 zhong3 liu2 = bad-nature-swollen-tumor = malignant tumor) may 惡化 (e4 hua4 = bad-transform = worsen).

惡魔 (e4 mo2 = evil-devil) encourages people’s 惡念 (e4 nian4 = evil-thoughts), 惡行 (e4 xing2 = evil-behavior/acts), but 惡有惡報 (e4 you3 e4 bao4 = bad-has-bad-repay = evil will catch up with evil-doers).

Warlords are 惡人 (e4 ren2 = fierce/harmful-persons/bullies), 作 惡多端 (zuo2 e4 duo1 duan1 = do-bad-many-sides = commit many wrongs/crimes). 除惡務盡 (chu2 e4 wu4 jin4 = remove-bad-must-exhaust) = crushing of evil forces must be merciless/thorough.

by Diana Yue