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 assassins

刺 (radical 刀 = dao1, knife/dagger) means stab/pierce: 魚刺 (yú2 ci4 = fish’s-sharp-bone), 刺繡 (ci4 xiu4 = needle-embroidery), 刺耳 (ci4 er3 = piercing/grating-ears), 刺激 (ci4 ji1 = prick-excite), 刺痛 (ci4 tong4 = prickly-pain). 心中有刺 (xin1 zhong1 you3 ci4 = heart-interior-has-thorn) means harboring secret grudge.

Spies 刺探 (ci4 tan4 = pierce/penetrate-probe = probe/collect) information. Superpower feels rising state is 芒刺在背 (mang2 ci4 zai4 bei4 = thorn-pricking-on-back = close/potential threat).

刺客 (ci4 ke4 = stab/kill-er = assassin) 行刺 (xing2 ci4 = carries-out-assassination) using 匕首 (bi3 shou3 = spoon/arrow-head-head = dagger) or 枪 (qiang1, pistol/rifle). Politician 被刺 (bei4 ci4 = is-stabbed/struck by assassin): 刺傷 (ci4 shang1 = stabbed/struck-wounded), 刺殺 (ci4 sha1 = stabbed/struck-killed).

by Diana Yue