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

暗
Putonghua pronunciation: an4
Cantonese pronunciation: am3
Meanings: dark, hidden, unclear, dull, dim, secretly


Oil-painting shows objects’ 明暗 (ming2 an4 = light-shadows = chiaroscuro). 明升暗降 (ming2 sheng1 an4 jiang4 = openly-promote-secretly-demote) means promoting someone to position with less real power. 暗算 (an4 shuan4 = secret-calculate) = stabbing/slandering/hurting someone behind his back.

Defector claims he 棄暗投明 (qi4 an4 tou2 ming2 = abandon-dark-join-light = is leaving bad/unrighteous forces to join good forces). Rivals 暗恨 (an4 hen4 = secretly-hate) each other. Conspirators plot 暗殺 (an4 sha1 = secret-killing/assassination).

by Diana Yue