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:

1\(^{st}\) tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2\(^{nd}\) tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3\(^{rd}\) tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4\(^{th}\) 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

Putonghua pronunciation: leng3
Cantonese pronunciation: iaang5

Meanings: cold, cool, cool down, chilly, detached, unexpected, sour

冷 (radical 冫 = 水 shui3, water) describes temperature/feelings/attitudes: 冷熱 (leng3 re4 = cold-hot temperature), 冷藏 (leng2 cang2 = cold/frozen-storage). 坐冷板凳 (zuo4 leng3 ban3 deng4 = sit-on-cold-plank-stool) = despised/ignored/unattended.

冷靜 (leng3 jing4 = cool/deteached-quiet/calm) observer 冷眼旁觀 (leng3 yan3 pang2 guan1 = cool-eye-aside-watch = coolly watches) rivals’ 冷戰 (leng3 zhan4 = cold-war = quarrel), 冷笑 (leng3 xiao4 = coldly-sneers/smiles/laughs), 放冷箭 (fang4 leng3 jian4 = release-cold-arrows = makes unexpected/sarcastic verbal attacks).

冷酷 (leng3 ku4 = cool-merciless) assassin 放冷鎗 (fang4 leng3 qiang1 = release-cold-gun = fires surprise singular gun-shots).

Target 冷不提防 (leng3 bu4 ti2 fang2 = cold-no-raise-guard = is surprised), 一身冷汗 (yi1 shen1 leng3 han4 = one/whole-body-cold-sweat = sweats/shivers all-over).

by Diana Yue