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 hunting

殺 (radical 口 shu1, killing-weapon) means 殺害 (sha1 hai4 = kill death) sha2 si3 = kill-harm-to-death), 殺戮 (sha1 lu4 = kill-slaughter).
自殺 (zi4 sha1 = self-kill) = suicide, 他殺 (ta1 sha1 = he/other-kill) sha1 shang1 wu3 qi4 = big-kill-harm-military-instrument = weapons of mass destruction.

Buddhists denounce 殺生 (sha1 sheng1 = killing-of-life), but death-penalty e.g. 殺頭 (sha1 tou2 = kill-head = beheading/ decapitation) upholds principle of 殺人填命 (sha1 ren2 tian2 ming4 = kill-person-fill/re-fill-life = killer/murderer pays with life).

Knife-wielder looks 殺氣騰騰 (sha1 qi4 teng2 teng2 = kill-air-rise-rise = terribly menacing). “天殺的!” (tian1 sha1 de0 = Heaven-kill-‘s) is angry curse meaning “God damn it!”/“goddammit!” or slangy adjective “cursed”/“goddam”.

by Diana Yue