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 flowers

Putonghua pronunciation: can2
Cantonese pronunciation: chaan4
Meanings: disabled, incomplete, shrinking, remnant

殘 (radical 歹 dai3, bad/evil) = hurt/partially-destroy: 殘暴 (can2 bao4 = hurt-violent/cruel) despot, 殘廢 (can2 fei4 = hurt-disabled) cripple/deaf-mute. Masochist 自殘 (zi4 can2 = self-maim = inflict wound on himself). 殘羹冷飯 (can2 geng1 leng3 fan4 = leftover-soup-cold-rice) = unappetizing leftovers.

殘月 (can2 yue4 = incomplete-moon) = thin waning moon. 殘夜 (can2 ye4 = incomplete-night) = what’s left of the sad night. 急景殘年 (ji1 jing3 can2 nian2 = hurrying-scenes-almost-gone-year) gives people the year-end blues. 收拾殘局 (shou1 shi2 can2 ju = collect-pick-remnant-game) means conclude chess endgame or round up messy situation.

Storm摧殘 (cui1 can2 = destroy-maim = destroys) crops. 殘花敗柳 (can2 hua1 bai4 liu3 = withered-flower-declined-willow) describes dying plants or sexually-exploited woman.