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 winter past-times

宰
Putonghua pronunciation: zai3
Cantonese pronunciation: joi2
Meaning: slaughter, butcher, kill, rule, govern

宰 (radical ~ mian2, house + 辛 xin1, briars/authority) means butcher/govern. God/ruler 主宰 (zu3 zai3 = master-rule = governs) people’s fate. 宰相 (zai3 xiang4 = govern-minister) means premier/prime-minister in feudal China.

Animals are 宰殺 (zai3 sha1 = slaughtered-killed) in 屠宰場 (tu2 zai3 chang2 = kill-butcher-area = slaughter-house/abattoir). Powerless employees 任人宰割 (ren4 ren2 zai3 ge1 = allow-people/others-butcher-carve-up = are at the mercy of boss’s exploitation).

Cook 宰雞殺鴨 (zai3 ji1 sha1 ya1 = slaughters-chicken-kills-duck = prepares banquet with chicken and duck dishes). Muslims 宰羊 (zai3 yang2 = kill-sheep/lamb) to celebrate 宰牲節 (slaughter-animal-festival = Aid al-Adha = Feast/Festival of the Sacrifice). At year-end villagers 宰豬 (zai3 zhu1 = butcher-pig) to make 炸肉 (la4 rou4 = marinated-cured-meat).

by Diana Yue