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 feeling miserable

哀
Putonghua pronunciation: a1
Cantonese pronunciation: oi1
Meanings: grief, pity, sorrow, mourn, bereavement, lamentation

哀 = 悲哀 (be1 ai1 = sad-grieved) = 哀傷 (ai1 shang1 = grieved-hurt) = grieved. 哀求 (ai1 qiu2 = sad-beg) = beseech desperately. Exiled poet 哀嘆 (ai1 tan4 = mournfully-sighs), sings 哀歌 (ai1 gei1 = tragic-song). 哀樂中年 (ai1 le4 zhong1 nian2 = sadness-joys-middle-years) = middle-ager’s bitter-sweet reflections.

Rescuers 哀憐 (ai1 lian2 = lament-pity) famine victims. Country 哀悼 (ai1 dao4 = lament-mourn) hero’s death. “哀希臘” (ai1 Xi1 La4 = mourn-“Greece”-transliterated) is Chinese title of Lord Byron’s poem The Isles of Greece.

哀樂 (ai1 yue4 = sad/mourning-music) accompanies funeral. Friends 致哀 (zhi4 ai1 = convey-grief/condolences), console widow: “節哀順變!” (jie2 ai1 shun4 bian4 = control-sorrow-follow/accept-change = “Get over it, look ahead.”)

by Diana Yue