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 Japanese Invasion

屠 Putonghua pronunciation: tu2
Cantonese pronunciation: to4
Meanings: slaughter

屠 (radical 尸 shì, corpse) means slaughter/kill. Mythological hero 屠龍 (tu2 long2 = slays-dragon). 屠夫 (tu2 fu1 = slaughter-man) = butcher. 屠場 (tu2 chang2 = slaughter-field) = slaughterhouse/abattoir. 屠宰業 (tu2 zai3 ye4 = slaughter-carve-up-trade) = slaughtering/meat-processing industry.

屠 also means 屠殺 (tu2 sha1 = butchering-killing) of humans. Cold-blooded soldiers 屠城 (tu2 cheng2 = slaughter-city = commit massive killings in conquered city). The book The Rape of Nanking describes 1937’s 南京大屠殺 (Nan2 Jing1 da4 tu2 sha1 = Nan-jing-big-butcher-kill = the Nanjing Massacre committed by Japanese army).

Buddhist preaches to killer: 放下屠刀, 立地成佛 (fang4 xia4 tu2 dao1, li4 di4 cheng2 fo2 = put-down-butcher-knife, stand-on-ground-become-buddha = stop killing, repent, and redemption will be yours rightaway).

by Diana Yue