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 the civil wars

内
Putonghua pronunciation: nei4
Cantonese pronunciation: noi6
Meanings: inner, internal, inside, within

Ideogram 内 (入 ri4, enter + arch/door) indicates entered/ within/inward: antonym 外 (wai4, outside/outward). 體內 (ti3 nei4 = body-inside) = within body. Elegantly-speaking, 外子 (wai4 zi3 = outside-person) means “my husband”, 內子 (nei4 zi3 = inside-person) means “my wife”.

Book’s 內容 (nei4 rong2 = inside-contain = contents) reflect writer’s 內心 (nei4 xin1 = inside-heart = heart/mind), 內涵 (nei4 han2 = inside-abundant-water = solid knowledge/ receptiveness).


Analyst predicts: “一年內 (yi1 nian2 nei4 = one-year-within = within one year) government will collapse!”

by Diana Yue