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

**撕**
Putonghua pronunciation: *si1*
Cantonese pronunciation: *si1*
Meanings: tear, rip, rend

撕 = radical 刊 (= 手 *shou3*, hand) + sound “斯 *si1*”: 撕開 (*si1 kai1* = tear-open), 撕破 (*si1 po4 = tear/rip-break/open), 撕掉 (*si1 diao4 = tear-up), 撕碎 (*si1 sui4 = tear-into-pieces). Fans 撕扯 (*si1 che3 = tear-tug/pull at) star’s clothes. 手撕雞 (*shou3 si1 jil1* = hand-shred-chicken) is whole-fried then hand-shredded.

撕票 (*si1 piao4 = tear-ticket) means 綁匪 (*bang3 fei3 = tie-thug = kidnappers) kill victim of 綁架案 (*bang3 jia4 an4 = tie-hold-case = kidnapping case). 撕下假面具 (*si1 xia4 jia3 mian4 jü4 = tear-split-false-face-utensil/mask) means tearing/pulling off cheat’s mask, exposing his falsehood.

Dissidents 撕毀 (*si1 hui3 = tear-up-destroy) peace agreement. Civil war 撕裂 (*si1 lie4 = tear-break/crack = rips apart) country.

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