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

裂 Putonghua pronunciation: lie4
Cantonese pronunciation: lit6
Meanings: split up, crack, cracked, torn

裂 (radical 衣 yī, clothes) means crack/split: 裂縫 (lie4 feng2 = crack-seam = fissure), 爆裂 (bao4 lie4 = burst-open). Ripe fruit 裂開 (lie4 kai1 = splits-open), shows 裂口 (lie4 kou3 = crack-mouth = split opening). 聲如裂帛 (sheng1 ru2 lie4 bo2 = sound-resembling-torn/rended-silk) describes shrill, stunning sound of singing or lute chord. 核裂變 (he2 lie4 bian4 = nucleus-split-change) = nuclear fission.

Spoilt friendship has 裂痕 (lie4 hen2 = crack-trace = crack-line/scar). Couple 決裂 (jüe2 lie4 = breaks-splits), 割裂 (ge1 lie4 = cut-break = severs) relationship. Disagreement makes parliament 分裂 (fen1 lie4 = split-crack = split).

War breaks out when 停火談判破裂 (ting2 huo3 tan2 pan4 po4 lie4 = stop-fire-talk-decision-break-crack = cease-fire talks fail).

by Diana Yue