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

Putonghua pronunciation: can3
Cantonese pronunciation: chaam2

Meanings: cruel, painful, pathetic, pitiful, tragic, terrible

慘 (radical † = 心 xin1, heart) describes cruelty inflicting great pain/grief: 慘烈 (can3 lie4 = cruel-violent/fierce) battle, 慘痛 (can3 tong4 = cruel-painful) experience, 悲慘 (bei1 can3 = tragic-cruel) fate. Bankrupt businessman 叫慘 (jiao4 can3 = scream/yell-tragic = groans/complains), 慘笑 (can3 xiao4 = paintfully-grins/hisses); “輸慘了!” (shu1 can3 le0 = “Lost-tragically!”)

Campus-shooting is 慘案 (can3 an4 = cruel/terrible/tragic-case/incident). War-crimes are 慘無人道 (can3 wu2 ren2 dao4 = cruel-no-human-way = cruel/inhumane): tortured prisoners 慘叫 (can3 jiao4 = painfully-scream), deaths are 慘不忍睹 (can3 bu4 ren3 du3 = cruel/pitiful-no-stand-see = terrible/tragic sights).

In civil war, losers suffer 慘敗 (can3 bai4 = terrible-defeat), but winners only 慘勝 (can3 sheng4 = terrible-victory = win at terrible costs).

by Diana Yue