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 missing persons

失
Putonghua pronunciation: shī
Cantonese pronunciation: sat1
Meanings: lose, loss, lost

失 = 失去 (shī qu4 = lose-away = lose). 失明 (shī ming2 = lose-brightness/sight) = blind. 失職 (shī zhī2 = fail-post) = commit faults in work. 失業 (shī ye4 = lose-job) = unemployed. 失婚 (shī hun1 = lose-marriage) = is dumped by spouse.

失敗 (shī bāi4 = lose-defeated = defeats/failures) make people 失望 (shī wàng4 = lose-hope = feel disappointed), 失意 (shī yì4 = lose-sentiment = dejected), 失常 (shī chāng2 = lose-normal = go out of their minds).

In wartime families/friends 失散 (shī sàn4 = lose-disperse = are scattered). 失蹤人口 (shī zōng1 ren2 kòu3 = lose-track-person-mouth = lost/missing persons) include many 失足少女 (shī zu2 shào4 nu3 = lose-foothold-young-girl = girls lured into prostitution).

by Diana Yue