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 Boxer Uprising

Putonghua pronunciation: luan4
Cantonese pronunciation: luen6
Meanings: untidy, unrestrained, illogical, disturbance, disorder, turmoil

亂 = disorder. Wind 吹亂 (chui1 luan4 = blows-untidy) hair. Kids 亂吃 (luan4 chi1 = unrestrainedly-eat), 亂說 (luan4 shuo1 = falsely/illogically-say), 亂來 (luan4 lai2 = unrestrainedly-come = act stupidly/wildly).

亂世 (luan4 shi4 = disorder-world) = world in turmoil. Mobsters 搗亂 (dao3 luan4 = rouse-disorder = make mess/trouble), 作亂 (zuo4 luan4 = cause-riot/disorder/rebellion).

When economy 亂七八糟 (luan4 qi1 ba1 zao1 = disorder-seven-eight-terrible = goes all wrong), finance 出亂子 (chu1 luan4 zi0 = emerge-disorder-diminutive = runs amuck). People 心慌意亂 (xin1 huang1 yi4 luan4 = heart-scared-ideas-turmoil = feel bewildered/panicky). Sage advises: "小不忍則亂大謀!" (xiao3 bu4 ren3 ze2 luan4 da4 mou2 = small-no-patience-then-upset-big-plan = Lose patience and you lose your game!)

by Diana Yue