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 short lives

命 (口 kou3, mouth + 令 ling4, command) means bestowed legacy: 天命 (tian1 ming4 = heaven’s-command = fate), 生命 (sheng1 ming4 = life-command = life), 使命 (shi4 ming4 = envoy-command = mission). 命運 (ming4 yun4 = life’s-workings) = fate/fortune/destiny.

Assassin shouts: 取你狗命 (qu3 ni3 gou3 ming4 = take-your-dog’s-life!) Target 拼命 (ping1 ming4 = risking/fighting-for-life = desperately) 逃命 (tao2 ming4 = runs-for-his-life), shouts 救命 (jiu4 ming4 = save-my-life!)

Accident claimed 一條人命 (yi1 tiao2 ren2 ming4 = one-unit-human-life = one life). Victim 死於非命 (si3 yu1 fei1 ming4 = die-of-not-fate = died unnatural death). 好命 (hao3 ming4 = good-life = lucky/blessed) guy wins lottery, cries: 要命 (yao4 ming4 = want/after-my-life = Wow/Terrible/Mamma mia!)

by Diana Yue