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 cycling

省

Putonghua pronunciation: sheng3
Cantonese pronunciation: saang2
Meanings: save, economical

省 = 節省 (jie2 sheng3 = tighten-save = economize): 省時 (sheng3 shi2 = save-time = time-saving), 省力 (sheng3 li4 = save-strength = strength/effort-saving). Editor 省略 (sheng3 lue4 = economize-condense = cuts down) details.

Frugal people advocate 可省則省 (ke2 sheng3 ze2 sheng3 = can-save-so-save = economize wherever possible). Chinese factory slogan says “多快好省” (duo1 kuai4 hao3 sheng3 = plenty-fast-good-economical = “Aim at greater, faster, better-quality, cheaper production yields”).

Bicycle-parking 省空間 (sheng3 kong1 jian1 = saves-empty-space). Cycling 上班 (shang4 ban1 = up/mount-shift = to work), 下班 (xia4 ban1 = down/leave-shift = from work) is 省錢 (sheng3 qian2 = save-money = economical) and 節省能源 (jie2 sheng3 neng2 yuan2 = tighten-save-energy-source = energy-saving).

by Diana Yue