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 contracts

權 (radical 木 mu4, wood/tree) means 權力 (qüan2 li4 = authority-power) or 權利 (qüan2 li4 = power/benefit = right): 人權 (ren2 qüan2 = human-rights), 侵權 (qin1 qüan2 = invade-right = tort), 權杖 (qüan2 zhang4 = power-stick = mace), 奪權 (duo2 qüan2 = seize-power).

In 1997 Britain 權衡利害 (qüan2 heng2 li4 hai4 = weighed-balanced-benefits-harms = weighed pros and cons), returned Hong Kong's 主權 (zhu3 qüan2 = master-power = sovereignty) and 治權 (zhi4 qüan2 = legislative-power) to China.

Rental agreement defines partners’ 權限 (qüan2 xian4 = powers-and-limitations). Owner has house's 所有權 (suo3 you3 qüan2 = which-has/posses-power = ownership), Tenant 有權 (you3 qüan2 = has-the-right-to) inhabit house, 無權 (wu2 qüan2 = has-no-right-to) sell it.

by Diana Yue