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 furniture

椅
Putonghua pronunciation: yi3
Cantonese pronunciation: yi2
Meaning: chair, stool, bench

Ancient 胡人 (Hu2 ren2 = northwestern-tribes) brought 胡床 (Hu2 chuang2 = Hu-people’s-bed = 椅 (radical 木 mu4, wood = stools/chairs) into China. Servants carried travelers/hunters on 交椅 (jiao1 yi3 = foldable/movable cross-legged-stools/chairs). 坐第一把交椅 (zuo4 di4 yi1 ba3 jiao1 yi3 = occupying-first-cross-legged-chair) describes top authority.

Artists design 餐椅 (can1 yi3 = dining-chairs), 沙发 (sha1 fa1 = “sofas”-translated), 旋转椅 xuan2 chuan3 yi3 = spin/swivel-chairs), 扶手椅 (fu2 shou3 yi3 = hold/support-arm-chairs). Park-strollers enjoy 長椅 (chang2 yi3 = long-benches).

Oldsters use 安樂椅 (an1 le4 yi3 = peaceful-happy-chair = 搖椅 yao2 yi3 = rocking-chairs), 按摩椅 (an4 mo3 yi3 = press-rub/massage-chairs), 輪椅 (jun2 yi3 = wheel-chairs). 電椅 (dian4 yi3 = electric-chairs) execute prisoners.

by Diana Yue