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 celebrations

Putonghua pronunciation: huan1
Cantonese pronunciation: foon1
Meaning: joy, cheer, fondness, cheerful, light-hearted, sexual intercourse

感謝 (radical 欠 qian4, strain upper-body) means joy/cheer: 感笑 (huan1 xiao4 = cheerfully-laugh), 感聚 (huan1 jü4 = merry-gathering). Crowds 感呼 (huan1 hu1 = joyously-shout/cheer), 感迎 (huan1 ying2 = cheer-welcome) hero.

Employee 喜歡 (xi3 huan1 = likes-loves) day-dreaming, 失歡於 (shi1 huan1 yu1 = loses-fondness/favor-with) boss. Bachelor feels 獨酌無歡 (du2 zhuo2 wu2 huan1 = alone-drinking-is-no-fun/joy), looks around for 一夕歡愉 (yi1 xi2 huan1 yu2 = one-night-of-joy/sexual-pleasure = one-night stand).

Poet 李白 (Li3 Bai2) famously wrote: 人生得意須盡歡 (ren2 sheng1 de2 yi4 xü1 jin4 huan1 = human-life-gain-satisfaction-must-exhaust-joy = Enjoy life to the full). Beethoven's 歡樂頌 (huan1 le4 song4 = joy-happiness-praise = Old to Joy) has 歡快 (huan1 kuai4 = cheerful-quick) rhythm.

by Diana Yue