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 PRC’s 60th year

平
Putonghua pronunciation: ping 2
Cantonese pronunciation: ping 4
Meanings: flat, balance, level, ordinary, calm, pacify, conquer

平 = 平衡 (ping heng 22 = level-balance), 平均 (ping jun 21 = even-equal), 平面 (ping mian 24 = flat-surface/two-dimensional), 平靜 (ping jing 24 = peaceful/calm). 平凡 (ping fan 22 = ordinary-mundane) = plain/ordinary/mediocre.

Heroes 打不平 (da bu ping 322 = beat-un-equal = attack/punish inequalities/wrongdoings) for victims. King’s army 平寇 (ping kou 24 = level-suppress/conquer bandits/rebels), brings 太平 (tai ping 42 = ultimate-peace/order). Buddhists/Christians pray for individuals’ 平安 (ping an 21 = peace-of-mind-safety), world’s 和平 (he ping 22 = harmony-calm = peace).

Egalitarians advocate 人人平等 (ren ren ping deng 2223 = person-person-level-grade = we’re all equal). China wants 和平崛起 (he ping jue qi 2223 = peaceful-loom-up = rise to greatness without conflict/war).

by Diana Yue