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 body-checks

Putonghua pronunciation: chou1
Cantonese pronunciation: chau1
Meaning: draw, suck, take out, extract, develop, lash

抽 (radical 手 = hand shou3, hand) means take/draw/pull/extract, 抽屉 (chou1 ti4 = draw-tray) = drawer. 抽空 (chou1 kong1 = take-empty/unoccupied) = squeeze out time. Government 抽税 (chou1 shui4 = demands-taxes). Agent 抽佣 (chou1 yong4 = takes-commission). 抽象 (chou1 xiang4 = extract-image) = abstract.

Chinese cooking uses 生抽 (sheng1 chou1 = raw-drawn/pressed = light soy-sauce), 老抽 (lao3 chou1 = old-drawn = dark soy-sauce). But 釜底抽薪 (fu2 di3 chou1 xin1 = pot-bottom-take-away-firewood) is clever strategy of removing source of threat/damage to halt/ease crisis.

抽鸦片 (chou1 ya1 pian4 = sucking/smoking-“o-pium”-transliterated), 抽煙 (chou1 yan1 = suck-smoke = smoking cigarettes), 抽大麻 (chou1 da4 ma2 = smoking-marijuana) affect health. Body-check includes 抽血 (chou1 xue3 = taking-blood) sample.

by Diana Yue