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 New Year resolutions

Putonghua pronunciation: jiu4
Cantonese pronunciation: gau6
Meanings: old, previous, used, past, passé, obsolete

舊 = past/used. Sentimental people 懷舊 (huai2 jiu4 = bosom-contain-old = are nostalgic), treasure舊日 (jiu4 ri4 = olden-days), 舊事 (jiu4 shi4 = past-events), re-visit 舊友 (jiu4 you3 = old-time-friends), 舊居 (jiu4 jü1 = old-residence/home). 念舊 (nian4 jiu4 = think-of-old) = show kindness to old friends/associates.

舊衣物 (jiu4 yi1 wu4 = old-clothes-things) cluster closets. Frugal person buys 舊書 (jiu4 shu1 = old/used-books), 舊車 (jiu4 che1 = old/used-car). Fickle person 貪新厭舊 (tan1 xin1 yan4 jiu2 = covet-new-disdain-old = frivolously changes spouse/job/hobby).

守舊 (shou3 jiu4 = guard-old = conservative) people mourn passing of 舊時代 (jiu4 shi2 dai4 = old-time-generation = old era/epoch), but their 陳舊 (chen2 jiu4 = aged-old = stale) views are unappealing.

by Diana Yue