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: ı = 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 ッチ 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 political parties

退
Putonghua pronunciation: tui4
Cantonese pronunciation: tui3
Meanings: backward, retreat

退 is opposite of 进 (jin4, advance). Both have radical 舟 (boat, indicating movement). Patients/students want 進步 (jin4 bu4 = forward-step = improvement/progress), not 退步 (tui4 bu4 = backward-step = relapse/getting worse).

Oldsters 退出 (tui4 chu1 = retreat-out = withdraw from) competition, 退伍 (tui4 wu3 = retire-enrolment = leave army), 退休 (tui4 xiu1 = withdraw-rest = retire). Bounced check gets 退回 (tui4 hui2 = retreat-return = returned). 退让 (tui4 rang4 = retreat-yield) describes submissive attitude/action.

In 1949 国民黨 (guo2 min2 dang3 = state-people-party = Nationalist Party) 撤退 (che4 tui4 = withdrew-action-retreated) to Taiwan, because strategically Taiwan 進可攻退可守 (jin4 ke3 gong1 tui4 ke3 shou3 = advance-can-attack-retreat-can-defend = is a good attack base and defense stronghold).

by Diana Yue