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 tenants

租 Putonghua pronunciation: zu1
Cantonese pronunciation: jo1
Meaning: rent, hire

租 (radical 禾 he2, grain-crop’s stem) means let/lease/rent/ hire. Landlord 租出 (zu1 chu1 = rents/leases-out) land/house to 租客 (zu1 ke4 = rent-guest/person = tenant), receives 租金 (zu1 jin1 = rent-gold/money = rental). Tourist 租車 (zu1 che1 = rents-car).

Qing Government ceded 租界 (zhu1 jie = rent-area = concessions) to foreign powers. Shanghai/Tianjin’s 英租界 (Ying1 zu1 jie4 = British-concession), 法租界 (Fa3 zu1 jie4 = French-Concession) had 治外法權 (zhi4 wai4 fa2 quan2 = government-outside-legal-right = extraterritoriality = exemption from local jurisdiction/laws).

租房 (zu1 fang2 = renting-house/apartment) is cheaper than 買房 (mai3 fang2 = buying-house/apartment), 租約 (zu1 yue4 = lease/rent-contract/agreement) states 月租 (yue4 zu1 = monthly-rental), but doesn’t allow 分租 (fen1 zu1 = divide-lease = sub-letting/sub-leasing).

by Diana Yue