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 People's Congress

退 (radical 步 = run/leave) = 后退 (hou4 tui4 = backward-retreat) is opposite of 前进 (qian2 jin4 = forward-advance): 退步 (tui4 bu4 = retreat-step = worsen), 退兵 (tui4 bing1 = withdraw-army).

退 = abandon/return: 退票 (tui4 piao4 = give-back-ticket for money), 退税 (tui4 shui4 = return-tax = tax rebate), 退黨 (tui4 dang3 = withdraw-from-party = surrender party membership). Activists 退出 (tui4 chu1 = withdraw-leave/quit) when radical movement退潮 (tui4 chao2 = retreat/ebb-tide = recedes/slow down).

Instead of 退居幕後 (tui4 jü1 mo4 hou4 = retreat-stay-curtain-behind = leaving front-line to direct things behind the scene), outgoing president 裸退 (luo3 tui4 = naked-withdraw = drops all posts), enjoys 退休 (tui4 xiu1 = withdraw-rest/end = retirement).

by Diana Yue