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 \ 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 vacation and retirement

Putonghua pronunciation: fang4
Cantonese pronunciation: fong3

Meaning: release, free, liberate, relieve, banish, disperse, radiate, disseminate

放 (radical 支 pu1, beat/tap) 放開 (fang4 kai1 = release-open = loosen/free), 放大 (fang4 da4 = blow-up-big = magnify).
Nomads 放牧 (fang4 mu4 = disperse/graze-herd). Buddhists 放生 (fang4 sheng1 = return captured wildlife into the wild).
Retiree 放長假 (fang4 chang2 jia4 = relieve-long-holiday = takes long vacation).

PLA 解放 (jie3 fang4 = untie-release = liberates) China, 釋放 (shi1 fang4 = releases-frees) prisoners, 放逐 (fang4 zhu2 = sends-away-banishes) dissidents.

Boss 放權 (fang4 qian2 = releases/disseminates-power), 放棄 (fang4 qi4 = gives-up-relinquishes) directorship, 放下重擔 (fang4 xia4 xhong4 dan4 = puts-down-heavy-load), tells successor: “放心 (fang4 xin1 = relax/put-down-heart = Don’t worry! 放手去幹 fang4 shou3 qü4 gan4 = free-hand-to-do = Do things freely, your way!)”

by Diana Yue