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 Los Angeles

**Putonghua pronunciation:** san3, san4

**Cantonese pronunciation:** saan2, saan3

Meanings: free, loose, disperse, sprawled out, random, scattered, undisciplined

Verb 散 (san4, radical 支 po1, lightly beat) = 散開 (san4 kai1 = disperse-scatter): 散學 (san4 xue2 = finish-school), 散會 (san4 hui4 = adjourn-meeting). Adjective 散 (san3) = 鬆散 (song1 san3 = loosely-disjointedly organized).

In 洛杉磯 (luo4 san1 ji1 = “Los Angeles”-transliterated), communities 分散 (fen1 san4 = apart-loose = are sprawled out), family members 散居各處 (san3 jju1 ge4 chu4 = separately-live-in-various-spots). Tourists 散步 (san4 bu4 = random/leisurely-walk) on beaches, imagine 自由散漫 (zi4 you2 san1 man4 = self-free-loose-free-flow = free/uninhibited/undisciplined) lifestyle.

Roads may appear 一盤散沙 (yi1 pan2 san3 sha1 = one-bowl-of-loose-sand = poorly connected), but electronic media 散播資訊 (san4 bo4 xun4 xi1 = disperse-broadcast-message-news = spread information) at great speed.

by Diana Yue