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 vacation and retirement

Putonghua pronunciation: song1
Cantonese pronunciation: sung1
Meaning: relax, loose, loosen, lax, slacken, soften, flexible, puffy

鬆 (radical 彈 biao1, dangling hair) describes 輕鬆 (qing1 song1 = light-easy) task, 松弛 (song1 chi2 = loose-lapse = flabby) muscles, Chaplin’s 松泡泡 (song1 pao1 pao1 = loose-puffy-puffy = roomy/baggy) pants. Old paint 松脱 (song1 tuo1 = loosens-falls-off). Passenger adjusts seat-belt’s 松緊 (song1 jin3 = looseness-tightness).

School’s 宽鬆 (kuan song1 = broad-relaxed = loose) rules make students 松懈 (song1 xie4 = slacken-lazy = un-alert/undisciplined). Banks 放鬆 (fang4 song1 = loosen-relax = relax) loans, 銀根鬆動 (yin2 gen1 song1 dong4 = silver/money-roots-relax-move = money markets are eased), businesses 鬆口氣 (song1 kou3 qi4 = loosen-mouth-breath = heave sigh of relief).

Retiree 鬆手 (song1 shou3 = relax-hand = lets go), 鬆綁 (song1 bang3 = is-released-from-ties/bondage).

by Diana Yue