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 lovers

Putonghua pronunciation: qi4
Cantonese pronunciation: hei3
Meanings: leave, throw out, give up, abandon

棄 = abandon thing/person. Weakling 放棄 (fang4 qi4 = release-forfeit = gives up) privileges/benefits. Litterbug 棄置 (qi4 zhi4 = leaves-puts) 棄物 (qi4 wu4 = thrown-out-things = unwanted items) anywhere. Dissident protests by 投棄權票 (tou2 qi4 quan2 piao4 = cast-give-up-right-vote = using vote abstention).

Unmarried mother 遺棄 (yi2 qi4 = leave-abandon = abandons) baby. Heartless husband 拋棄妻子 (pao1 qi1 qi4 zi3 = throw-wife-abandon-son = abandons family). 時代的棄兒 (shi2 dai4 de0 qi4 er2 = time-generation’s-abandoned-child) describes dropouts discarded by changing times.

Failure-stricken husband appreciates wife’s 不離不棄 (bu4 li2 bu4 qi4 = won’t-leave-won’t-abandon = remaining faithful and devoted). Pragmatist 人棄我取 (ren2 qi4 wo3 qu3 = person/other-abandon-I-take = take what others don’t want).

by Diana Yue