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 diet abstinence

欲 (yu4)

Putonghua pronunciation: yu4
Cantonese pronunciation: yuk6
Meanings: desire, craving, yearning, lust, greed

欲 = 意欲 (yi4 yu4 = idea-want) = intent/yearning, 欲念 (yu4 nian4 = desire-idea = urge), 欲望 (yu4 wang4 = lust-hope = desire). 欲 also means 快將 (kuai4 jiang1 = soon-will).

山雨欲來 (shan1yu3 yu4 lai2 = mountain-rain-soon-will-come) describes atmosphere of approaching storm/crisis. Debt-ridden businessman 欲罷不能 (yu4 ba4 bu4 neng2 = want-stop-no-able = wants to but cannot quit), 欲哭無淚 (yu4 ku1 wu2 lei4 = wants-to-cry-no-tears = is miserable beyond tears).

飲食男女之欲 (yin3 shi2 nan2 nü ren2 zhi1 da4 yu4 = drink-eat-man-woman-mankind-‘s-big-desire) = food/gluttony and sex are mankind’s foremost desires. Sage advises: 無欲乃剛 (wu2 yu4 nai3 gang1 = no-want/desire-then-strong = Don’t fancy ambitions/greed; then you can stand firm).

by Diana Yue