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 reunion gatherings

故
Putonghua pronunciation: gu4
Cantonese pronunciation: goo3
Meanings: old-time, past, ancient, original, former, late, die, dead

故 contains 古 (gu3, ancient), means old/former: 故事 (gu4 shi4 = past-event = story), 故鄉 (gu4 xiang1 = old-village = birthplace/hometown/homeland), 故友 (gu4 you3 = dead-friend). 故宮 (gu4 gong1 = old-palace) means Beijing’s former imperial palace.

Emigrants re-visit 故國 (gu4 guo2 = once-country = country they left), 故地重遊 (gu4 di4 chong2 you2 = old-places-again-tour = re-visit old haunts), cherish reunion with 故人 (gu4 ren = past-persons = old-time friends/acquaintances).

一見如故 (yi1 jian4 ru2 gu4 = one-see-resemble-old) describes new acquaintances getting along well immediately. However, 衣不如新, 人不如故 (yi1 bu4 ru2 xin1, ren1 bu4 ru2 gu4 = clothes-incomparable-new, person-incomparable-old = Clothes are better when new, but new friends can’t beat old friends.)

by Diana Yue