Character Builder 您好嗎？

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 austerity measures

稅 Putonghua pronunciation: shui4 Cantonese pronunciation: sui3 Meanings: tax

稅 (radical 禾 he2, grain-crop) originally meant farmers’ rent/tax. Government 徵税 (zheng1 shui4 = levies-taxes), citizens 交税 (jiao1 shui4 = pay-taxes): 收入税 (shou1 ru4 shui4 = receive-enter-tax = income tax), 產業税 (can3 ye4 shui4 = property-estate-tax = property-tax).

Impoverished government adjusts 稅率 (shui4 lü4 = tax-rates): rich pays 重税 (zhong4 shui4 = heavy-taxes), middle-class 減税 (jian3 shui4 = lessen-tax = gets tax-reduction). Businessmen 避税 (bi4 shui4 = dodge-taxes), 逃税 (tao2 shui4 = escape/avoid-paying-taxes), flee to 稅務天堂 (shui4 wu4 tian1 tang2 = taxes-affairs-heaven-hall = tax haven).

We lament: 逃不了死, 逃不了税 (tao2 bu4 liao3 si3, tao2 bu4 liao3 shui4 = escape-cannot-death, escape-cannot-taxes = There's no escaping from death and taxes).

by Diana Yue