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 tenants


Ex-lovers 再續前緣 (zai4 xü2 qian2 yüan2 = again-link-previous-destined-link = resume relationship). Bachelor 續弦 (xü2 xian2 = re-tie/mend-fiddle-string = remarries after wife dies).

Critics call popular 連續劇 (lian2 xü2 jü2 = linked-connected-drama = drama series) 續集 (xü2 jü2 = next/new-sequel) 狗尾續貂 (gou3 wei3 xü2 diao1 = dog's-tail-extend-mink = disappointing tag-on to brilliant original). Capital injection is dying company's 續命湯 (xü2 ming4 tang1 = sustain-life-broth/drink = reviving boost).

by Diana Yue