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 vacation and retirement

Putonghua pronunciation: guan1
Cantonese pronunciation: gwaan1
Meaning: shut, close, obstacle, block, imprison, mountain pass, entry-exit point, link

關 (radical 門 men2, door) means pass/block: 關口 (guan1 kou3 = mountain-pass-opening/gate or critical juncture), 關卡 (guan1 ka3 = border-pass-block = border check-point/customs). Verb 關 means shut/close: 關窗 (guan1 chuang1 = shut-window), 關門 (guan1 men2 = shut-door or close down business/organization), 關機 (guan1 ji1 = shut-down-machine/computer).

關係 (guan1 xi4 = join-link) means relationship/contacts between things/people. Businessman 拉關係 (la1 guan1 xi4 = pull-contacts/links/strings = exploits social “guanxi”), so proposal 過關 (guo4 guan1 = go-through-pass = gets through/approved).

Team works overnight to 開關 (chuang3 guan1 = charge-guarded-mountain-pass = try achieve significant breakthrough). Leaders show 關心 (guan1 xin1 = link-heart = concern).

Vacationer shrugs duty: "與我無關!" (yü2 wo3 wu2 guan1 = with-me-none-relationship = "I ain’t involved!")

by Diana Yue