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 Victoria Harbour

深
Putonghua pronunciation: shen1
Cantonese pronunciation: sam1
Meanings: deep, depth

深 = 深度 (shen1 du4 = deep-degree) = 深淺 (shen1 qian3 = deep-to-shallow) = depth. 水深 (shui3 shen1 = water-deep) = water's depth. Chinese city “深圳” (shen1 zheng4 = Shenzhen) literally means “deep ditch”.

深 = adjective/adverb 深深 (shen1 shen1 = deep-deep): 深夜 (shen1 ye4 = deep-night), 深思 (shen1 si1 = deep-think = seriously ponder), 深愛 (shen1 a4 = deeply-love). 深刻 (shen1 ke1 = deep-incise) describes impressions/analysis. 深不可測 (shen1 bu4 ke3 ce1 = deep-no-can-measure/guess = unfathomable) describes abyss or mysterious/profound ideas.

China’s national principles are “深挖洞, 廣積糧, 不稱霸” (shen1 wa1 dong4, guang3 jil liang2, bu4 cheng1 ba4), i.e. deeply-dig-holes (defense), widely-accumulate-grain (economy), no-claim/become-hegemony (foreign policy).

by Diana Yue