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 golden week

Putonghua pronunciation: zhou1
Cantonese pronunciation: jau1
Meanings: rim, cycle, round, time cycle, week, encircled, all-inclusive

周 (showing □ kou3, mouth) means cycle/encircled. 周圍 (zhou1 wei2 = rim-surround) = surrounding. 周邊 (zhou1 bian1 = rim’s-side) = neighboring. 周密 (zhou1 mi4 = encircled-all-inclusive) = faultlessly-calculated/planned. 圓周 (yuan2 zhou1 = circle’s-rim) = circumference. 周期 (zhou1 qi1 = cycle-period) = cycle. 周而復始 (zhou1 er2 fu4 shi3 = cycle-and-resume-begin) describes term/cycle’s completion and resumption.

周 also means 星期 (xing1 qi1 = stars-period = week). 一周 (yi1 zhou1 = one week) has 周日 (zhou1 ri4 = week-days), 周末 (zhou1 mo4 = week-end). 周刊 (zhou1 kan1 = week-publish) = weekly journal.

Couple celebrates wedding 周年 (zhou1 nian2 = cycle-year = anniversary). Employees look forward to 黃金周 (huang2 jin1 zhou1 = yellow-gold-week = golden week) holidays.

by Diana Yue