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 lonely people

寡
Putonghua pronunciation: gua3
Cantonese pronunciation: gwa2
Meanings: lacking, single, few, scant, widowed, bland

寡 (radical 门 mian2, roof) suggests lonely dweller/widow: 孤寡 (gu1 er2 gua3 fu4 = orphaned-child-widowed-woman/wife = deceased's family), 新寡 (xin1 gua3 = newly-widowed). 守寡 (shou3 gua3 = maintain-widowed) means 寡居 (gua3 jü1 = widowed-reside = live in widowhood). 寡人 (gua1 ren2 = lacking-person) is Chinese emperor's modest self-reference.

寡言 (gua3 yan2 = lacking/few-words = laconic) person 寡趣 (gua3 qü4 = lacks-fun), 寡歡 (gua3 huan1 = lacks-mirth/joy). 味寡 (wei4 gua3 = taste-lacking) describes bland-tasting cooking or un-stimulating conversation/writing. 寡頭政治 (gua3 tou2 zheng4 zhi4 = single-head-political-rule) = oligarchy.

Social idealists wish 鰥寡孤獨, 皆有所養 (guan1 gua3 gu2 du2, jie1 you3 suo3 yang3 = bachelors-widows-orphans-Ioners, all-have-their-feed = all family-less people have food/care).

by Diana Yue