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 arithmetics


算帳 (suan4 zhang4 = calculate-accounts) means handle/clear accounts/debts or avenge wrongs. 老謀深算 (lao3 mou2 shen1 suan4 = old/mature-plot/conspiracy-deep-calculate) describes seasoned schemer. 清算 (qing1 suan4 = clear-sums) = purge, 暗算 (an4 suan4 = dark/secretly-harm) = cheat/assassinate.

Without 預算 (yü4 suan4 = pre-calculate = budget), housewife can't 打算 (da3 suan4 = hit/make-calculation = plan ahead), says “算了!” (suan4 le0 = “Forget it!”)

by Diana Yue