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: tui4
Cantonese pronunciation: tui3
Meaning: retreat, return, ebb, recede, withdraw, retire, backward

退 (radical 走 = 走 zou3, run/leave) = 后退 (hou4 tui4 = backward-retreat); 退步 (tui4 bu4 = retreat-step = deteriorate), 退烧 (tui4 shao1 = recede-burn = receding-temperature/fever), 退税 (tui4 shui4 = return-tax = tax rebate), 退兵 (tui4 bing1 = withdraw-army). 進退兩難 (jin4 tui4 liang3 nan2 = advance-retreat-both-difficult) = in a dilemma.

Career 不進反退 (bu4 jin4 fan3 tui4 = no-advance-opposite-recede = instead of improving, worsens), star contemplates 退路 (tui4 lu4 = retreat-road = exit plan), 退出 (tui4 chu1 = retreat-out = leaves/quits) movie-world.

Ruler 退位讓賢 (tui4 wei4 rang4 xian2 = return-post-yield-to-wise/virtuous = lets eligible successor takeover), 退休 (tui4 xiu1 = retreat-rest = retires), 裸退 (luo3 tui4 = naked-withdraw = drops all posts/titles).

by Diana Yue