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

休
Putonghua pronunciation: xiu1
Cantonese pronunciation: yau1
Meanings: cease, stop, rest

休 shows 休 (人 ren2, person) resting against 木 (mu4, wood/tree). 休止 (xiu1 zhi3 = rest-stop) = cease. 休息 (xiu1 xi1 = rest-stop) = rest.

Invalid needs 休養 (xiu1 yang3 = rest-nourish = rest/recovery). War-devastated country needs 休養生息 (xiu1 yang3 sheng1 xi1 = rest-nourish-grow-benefit = rest/redevelopment/growth). 休假 (xiu1 jia4 = rest-holiday) = take leave/vacation. 退休 (tui4 xiu1 = retreat-rest) = retirement.

Husband dislikes wife’s 喋喋不休 (die2 die2 bu4 xiu1 = chat-chat-no-stop = endless nagging), mentions 休妻 (xiu1 qi1 = stop-wife = annul wife). Wife 不肯罷休 (bu4 keng3 ba4 xiu1 = no-willing-cease-stop = won’t give in/up), shouts “你休想!” (ni3 xiu1 xiang3 = you-stop-think = “Don’t dare you think about it!”

by Diana Yue