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 resting

息 (radical 心 xin1, heart) means 休息 (xiu1 xiu1 = stop~rest = take a rest). Jogger reaches kiosk, 歇息 (xie1 xiu1 = pauses~rests), 喘息 (chuan3 xiu1 = pant~breath = pants, seizes chance to rest/recover). 小息 (xiao3 xiu1 = little~rest) = short break for coffee/siesta.

Adjudicator 平息 (ping2 xiu1 = press~down~stop = pacifies) quarrel: “Let’s 息事宁人 (xi1 shi4 ning2 ren2 = subdue-affair~ pacify~people = resolve issue, end dispute peacefully)”. Compensated person 息怒 (xi1 nu4 = stop~angry = anger subsides).

樹欲靜而風不息 (shu4 yu4 jing4 er2 feng1 bu4 xiu1 = tree~desires~quiet~but~wind~won’t~stop) describes children mourning parents’ passing. Pastor blesses deceased: 主懷安息 (zhu3 huai2 an1 xiu1 = master~bosom~peaceful~rest = Rest in the arms of the Lord).

by Diana Yue