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

獨 (radical 亻 qían3, dog) suggests single dog among sheep. 獨自 (du2 zi4 = single-self) = by oneself. 獨立 (du2 li4 = alone-stand) = achieve/keep independent status/means. 獨唱 (du2 chang4 = single-sing) = solo. Designer’s 獨創 (du2 chuang4 = uniquely-creative) style shows 獨特 (du2 te4 = unique/unequalled-unusual) aesthetics.

獨眼龍 (du2 yan3 long2 = one-eyed-dragon) also means one-eyed guy. 獨行俠 (du2 xing2 xia2 = lonely-walk-knight) = hero roaming/acting alone. 獨裁者 (du2 cai2 zhe3 = single-judge/decide-person) = dictator.

獨身漢 (du2 shen1 han4 = companion-less-body-man = bachelor) 獨來獨往 (du2 lai2 du2 wang3 = single-come-single-go = goes places alone), sighs: 獨酌無歡! (du2 zhuo2 wu2 huan1 = single-pour-wine-no-mirth = “Drinking/eating alone is no fun!”)

by Diana Yue