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

寂 (radical — mian2, roof) indicates person working silently under roof. 寂静 (ji4 jing4 = quiet-soundless) describes hushed landscape/atmosphere. 寂寥宇宙 (ji4 liao2 yu3 zhou4 = silent-sparse/spacious-all-dimensions-all-time = the soundless universe/cosmos) fascinates astronomers. Before Harry Potter, Rowling was 寂寂無名 (ji4 ji4 wu2 ming2 = silent-silent-no-name = unknown/unheard-of).

Buddhists say 寂滅 (ji4 mie4 = silent-extinction) for life’s passing. Commemorating great monk’s 入寂 (ru4 ji4 = entry-into-silence = 圓寂 yuan2 ji4 = round/perfect-silence = passing away), 全場寂然 (quan2 chang3 ji4 ran2 = whole-field/hall-silent-so = congregation is speechless/motionless).

Phone-in program 寂寞的心 (ji4 mo4 de0 xin1 = silent-quiet-’s-heart = Lonely Hearts) airs singletons’ wish to find boyfriend/girlfriend and end 枯寂 (ku1 ji4 = wilted/deadened-silent/lonely = inactive/dull) life.

by Diana Yue