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 natural harmony

和 (he2, grain-crop) means 溫和 (wen1 he2 = warm-mild), 調和 (tiao2 he2 = mix-blend). Match 打和 (da3 he2 = fight-even = ends with tied scores). Brothers 不和 (bu4 he2 = not-harmonious = dislike/spurn each other). Composers study 和聲 (he2 sheng1 = blended-sound = harmony). Musicians 唱和 (chang4 he2 = sing-echo/accompany each other).

天時地利人和 (tian1 shi2 di4 li4 ren2 he2 = heaven-time-land-advantage-people-harmony = right time, right place, right people) decide mission’s success. 和平 (he2 ping2 = harmony-calm) means peace/peaceful. Tolstoy wrote “戰爭與和平” (zhan4 zheng1 yu3 he2 ping2 = War-and-Peace).

Keep society/relationships 和諧 (he2 xie2 = peaceful-harmonious).

中和 (zhong1 he2 = taking central/unbiased- friendly/peaceful position) is Chinese philosophy’s Golden Mean.

by Diana Yue