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

Putonghua pronunciation: men1, men4
Cantonese pronunciation: moon6
Meanings: muffled, sealed, stuffy, stifling, stifled, suppressed, boring, bored, melancholic

闷 (men2, doors enclosing 心 xin1, heart) means stuffy/boring: 悶熱 (men4 re4 = stifling-hot), 悶雷 (men4 lei2 = muffled-thunder = dry thunder), 沉悶 (chen2 men1 = sink-boring = uninteresting/boring).

闷葫芦 (men4 hu2 lu2 = sealed-gourd-bottle) = uncommunicative person. 悶蛋 (men4 dan4 = boring-egg) = a real bore. Sly enemy 悶聲不響 (men1 sheng1 bu4 xiang3 = suppress-voice-no-sound = noiselessly) deals 悶棍 (men4 gun4 = stifled-stick = unannounced blow/attack).

闷局 (men4 jü2 = stifled-game = stalemate in chess or non-progressing situation) produces 苦悶 (ku3 men4 = bitter-boredom = ennui). Don’t be 悶悶不樂 (men4 men4 bu4 le4 = bored-bored-no-happy = depressed). 找樂去! (zhao3 le4 qü4 = seek-happy-go) = Go get some fun!

by Diana Yue