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 practice

Putonghua pronunciation: wen1
Cantonese pronunciation: wan1
Meanings: temperature, heat, warm, tepid, gentle, temperate, review, revisit

溫 (radical 水 = water shui3, water) means temperature/heat/hot/warm: 溫帶 (wen1 dai4 = temperate zone), 溫度 (wen1 du4 = warmth-degree = temperature), 溫暖 (wen1 nuan3 = warm-warmth), 降溫 (jiang4 wen1 = falling-temperature), 體溫 (ti3 wen1 = body-temperature). Slums are diseases' 温床 (wen1 chuang2 = hot-bed).

Girls like 溫柔 (wen1 rou2 = warm-soft/gentle), 溫和 (wen1 he2 = warm-kind), 溫文 (wen1 wen2 = warm-cultivated/polite/genteel) men. Old flame begs 舊夢重溫 (jiu4 meng4 chong2 wen1 = old-dreams-again-warm-up = revisit past joys).

Students 溫習 (wen1 xi2 = review-practice = re-read/review) lessons, 溫熟 (wen1 shu2 = review-cooked = study well) exam texts. 溫故知新 (wen1 gu4 zhi1 xin1 = review-old-know-new) = revisiting old teachings yields new insight.

by Diana Yue