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 making selections

定
Putonghua pronunciation: ding4
Cantonese pronunciation: ding6
Meaning: decide, determine, establish, stabilize, certain, confirm


Prisoner gets 定罪 (ding4 zúi4 = decision-guilty-verdict). Immigrants find 安定 (ān1 ding4 = peaceful-stable) region, 定居 (ding4 jū1 = settle-abode). 無定向風 (wú2 ding4 xiāng4 fēng1 = no-fixed-direction-winds) describes whimsical person/policies.

Attackers 鎖定 (suò3 ding4 = lock-firm = fix on) targets. 置棋不定 (jū3 qí2 bu4 ding4 = hold-chess-piece-not-decided = undecisive) side splits. 大局已定 (dà jū4 yǐ3 ding4 = big/overall-game/situation-already-determined = win/lose situation is clear/irreversible).

by Diana Yue