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 Beijing

環
Putonghua pronunciation: huan2
Cantonese pronunciation: waan4
Meanings: ring, loop, section, encircle

環 (radical 王 = 玉 yù4, jade) means ring/circle: 指環 (zhi3 huan2 = finger-ring), 花環 (hua1 huan2 = floral-wreath), 光環 (guang1 huan2 = light-ring = halo), 環節 (huan2 jie2 = ring-section) = part/section. 一環扣一環 (yi1 huan2 kou4 yi1 huan2 = one-loop-hooks-one-loop) describes tightly-knit occurrences/sequels.

環繞 (huan2 rao3 = encircle-surround): 環球 (huan2 qiu2 = encircling-globe = worldwide), 環境 (huan2 jing4 = surrounding-area/circumstances = environment), 環保 (huan2 bao3 = environmental-protection). 四季循環 (si4 ji4 xün2 huan2 = four-seasons-follow-circle) = rotation of four seasons.

環城路 (huan2 cheng2 lu4 = encircle-city-road) = ring road, e.g. Beijing’s 二環 (er4 huan2 = second-ring), 三環 (san3 huan3 = third-ring), 六環 (liu4 huan2 = sixth-ring, furthest out).

by Diana Yue