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 winter past-times

冬
Putonghua pronunciation: dong1
Cantonese pronunciation: dung1
Meaning: winter

冬 (radical 冫 zhi3, arrive last) = winter: 冬季 (dong1 ji4 = winter-season), 冬天 (dong1 tian1 = winter-days). 冬月 (dong1 yue4 = winter-month) is 11th lunar month. 冬至日 (dong1 zhi4 ri4 = winter-arrive-day) is winter solstice (21st/22nd/23rd December), 22nd of 24 solar terms in Chinese lunar calendar.

Snakes/bears 冬眠 (dong1 mian2 = winter-slumber = hibernate). Housewives prepare 冬衣 (dong1 yi1 = winter-clothes). 冬青 樹 (dong1 qing1 shu4 = winter-green-tree) = holly. Athletes like 冬泳 (dong1 yong3 = winter-swimming).

Farmers 秋收冬藏 (qi1 shou1 dong1 cang2 = in-autumn-gather-harvest-in-winter-store-harvest), enjoy 冬聞 (dong1 xian2 = winter-leisure-time). Still, they 冬耕 (dong1 geng1 = winter-plough = dig/plough fields to retain moisture, remove pests/bugs), tend to 冬麥 (dong1 mai4 = winter-grown-wheat-crop).

by Diana Yue