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 partying

聚
Putonghua pronunciation: ju 4
Cantonese pronunciation: jui 6
Meanings: concentrate, assemble, gathering

聚 = assemble/concentrate: 短聚 (duan3 ju4 = short-gathering), 重聚 (chong2 ju4 = again-meet), family’s Thanksgiving 團聚 (tuan2 ju4 = circle-gather = reunion). 聚焦鏡 (ju4 jiao1 jing4 = concentrate-sharp-point-mirror/lens) = focusing lens. Overseas Chinese 聚居 (ju4 ju1 = congregate-reside/settle) in Chinatowns. Church-goers attend 聚會 (ju4 hui4 = assemble-meeting = assembly/service), 聚精會神 (ju4 jing1 hui4 shen2 = concentrate-essence-assemble-spirit = concentrate) on sermon. Friends 歡聚 (huan1 ju4 = joyous-gather = enjoy get-together) at Christmas 聚餐 (ju4 can1 = gather-feast = dinner gathering). Leader’s 凝聚力 (ning2 ju4 li4 = concentrate-gather-power = ability to draw/unite/stabilize supporters) strengthens party’s solidarity. 聚寶盆 (ju4 bao3 pan2 = assemble-treasures-pan/bowl = fairy’s bowl miraculously yielding treasures) describes capital/wealth-attracting hubs like Hong Kong.

by Diana Yue