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 feeling miserable

Putonghua pronunciation: mean1, mean4
Cantonese pronunciation: moon6
Meanings: stuffy, pent-up, stifling, boredom


吃闷棍 (chi4 men4 gun4 = eat/get-stifling-stick's-blow) = receive rude retort/hit-back. Chess-player’s odd move makes opponent 纳闷 (na4 men4 = get-bored/puzzled): 悶葫芦裡賣什麼藥 (men4 hu2 lu2 li3 mai4 shen2 me0 yao4 = Tightly-lidded-gourd-inside-sell-what-medicine = What’s he up to?)

Disillusioned dreamer 闷闷不樂 (men4 men4 bu4 le4 = bored-bored-not-happy = feels low), cannot dispel 苦闷 (ku3 men4 = bitter-boredom = weariness/ennui).

by Diana Yue