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 false hopes

止 (zhì)
Cantonese pronunciation: ji2
Meanings: halt, stop, cease

止 = 靜止 (jìng4 zhi3 = quiet/still) • 停止 (tíng2 zhi3 = halt-stop). Given candy, kid止哭 (zhi3 ku1 = stops-crying).
In music, 休止符 (xiū1 zhi3 fu2 = rest-stop-sign) = rest.

Government 禁止 (jìn4 zhi3 = ban-stop = forbids) drug-trafficking, 制止 (zhì4 zhi3 = controls/constrains-stops) public drug-hawking, 防止 (fáng2 zhi3 = defend-stop = prevent) drug-abuse. When patient’s wound 流血不止 (liú2 xiū4 bu4 zhi3 = flow-blood-no-stop = bleeds non-stop), nurse applies bandage to 止血 (zhi3 xiū4 = stop-bleeding), prescribes pills to 止痛 (zhi3 tèng3 = stop/kill-pain).

心如止水 (xīn1 rú2 zhi2 shuǐ3 = heart-resemble-still-water) describes person/widow who has abandoned desire/ambition. 學無止境 (xué2 wú2 zhi3 jìng4 = study-has-no-stop-territory) = Learning/knowledge is infinite/inexhaustible.

by Diana Yue