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 quantitative easing

Putonghua pronunciation: song1
Cantonese pronunciation: sung1
Meanings: relax, ease, loose, slack, slacken, unstrict

鬆 (radical 彳 biao1, hair let down) means 放鬆 (fang4 song1 = release-loosen = relax). 鬆緊 (song1 jin3 = loose-tight) describes degree of tightness/elasticity. 鬆脆 (song1 cui4 = puffy-crispy) describes biscuits/chips. 鬆散 (song1 san3 = relaxed-loose) describes loose discipline/organization.

鬆手 (song1 shou3 = relax-hand) = relax grip. 鬆口 (song1 kou3 = relax-mouth) = relax bite, or leak information. 輕鬆 (qing1 song1 = light-weight-relax) describes light burden or unpressed/light-hearted feeling.

Banks’ 宽鬆 (kuan1 song1 = wide-relax = un-restrictive/liberal) lending lets investors 鬆一鬆 (song1 yil son1 = relax-a-bit-relax = ease up a bit), 手頭鬆動 (shou3 tou2 song1 dong4 = hand-head-relax-move = have spare cash on hand). But bankers cannot 鬆懈 (song1 xie1 = relax-lazy = relax alert/attention).