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 surgical operations

**Wei**

Putonghua pronunciation: **wei1**
Cantonese pronunciation: **mei1**
Meaning: small, tiny, mini-, micro-, fine, delicate

微 (radical † chi4, small step) means 微弱 (wei1 ruo4 = small/fine-light/weak): 微风 (wei1 fen1 = light-wind/breeze), 微温 (wei1 wen1 = slightly-warm), 微積分 (wei1 ji1 fen1 = micro-accumulated-points = calculus), 微波爐 (wei1 bo1 lu2 = micro-wave-oven). Clan 衰微 (shuai1 wei1 = weakens-shrinks), scion feels 卑微 (bei1 wei1 = debased-lowly/insignificant).

精微 (jing1 wei1 = fine-intricate) describes penetrative knowledge/art, Mona Lisa’s 微笑 (wei1 xiao4 = light-laugh/grin = smile) is 微妙 (wei1 miao4 = delicate-intriguing/enticing). 微塵 (wei1 chen2 = tiny-dust-particles) reflect 微觀宇宙 (wei1 guan1 yu3 zhou4 = micro-scope-physical-dimensions-temporal-dimensions = microscopic universe).

After 微創手術 (wei1 chuang1 shou3 shu4 = minimal-injury-hands-method = minimally-invasive surgery), patient 輕微發燒 (qing1 wei1 fa1 shao1 = slightly-develops-fever).

by Diana Yue