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 winter past-times

Putonghua pronunciation: du2
Cantonese pronunciation: duk6
Meaning: read, read aloud, recite, study

讀 (radical言 yan2, speech/words) means 讀書 (du2 shu1 = read/study-books): 讀者 (du2 zhe3 = read-er), 讀本 (du2 ben3 = reading-text). Judge 宣讀 (xuan1 du2 = pronounces-reads-out) verdict. Student/defeated politician 閉門讀書 (bi4 men2 du2 shu1 = shut-doors-read-books = declines invitations, studies/reflects).

讀博士 (du2 bo2 shi4 = read/study-broad/wide-read/catholic-scholar) = studying for a Ph.D degree). 讀書愈不知行千里路 (du2 wan4 juan4 shu1 bu4 ru2 xing2 wan4 li3 lu4 = read-10,000-scrolls/volume-books-not-comparable-to-travel-10,000-miles-roads) means more knowledge is gained by extensive travelling than by extensive reading.

Retirees 讀閒書 (du2 xian2 shu1 = read-leisure/fun-books). 映雪 閑讀 (ying3 xue3 xian2 du2 = reflect-snow-leisure/fun-read = reading leisurely by the snow's reflected light) is nice winter past-time.

by Diana Yue