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 leisure

Putonghua pronunciation: xian2
Cantonese pronunciation: haan4
Meanings: leisure, idle

閒 (xian2) means leisure/idleness. 閒 shows 月 (yue4, moon) seen through 門 (men2, doors). 閒 shows 木 (mu4, wood/trees) seen through 門 (men2, doors).

Loafers 游手好閒 (you2 shou3 hao4 xian2 = swim/swing-arms-enjoy-leisure). Chatterboxes 說閒話 (shuo1 xian2 hua4 = talk-idle-speech = make gossip), 管人閒事 (guan3 ren2 xian2 shi4 = control-people's-idle-affairs = poke into other people's affairs).

At coffee-break we 忙裡偷閒 (mang2 li3 tou1 xian2 = busy-amidst-steal-leisure = grab some free time), 閒談 (xian2 tan2 = leisurely-talk/chat). 休閒服 (xiu1 xian2 fu2 = rest-leisure-clothes) = off-work/casual-wear. 閒雲野鶴 (xian2 yun2 ye3 he4 = leisurely-cloud-wild-crane = unengaged person enjoying freedom) feels 閒情逸致 (xian2 qing2 yi4 zhi4 = leisure-feelings-free-sentiments = mood for relaxation/fun).

by Diana Yue