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 feeling miserable

愁
Putonghua pronunciation: chou2
Cantonese pronunciation: sau4
Meanings: sadness, worry, lack

Character 愁 = 秋 (qiu1, autumn) + 心 (xin1, heart), means sad/forlorn. Rich kids 不愁衣食 (bu4 chou2 yi1 shi2 = do-not-worry/lack-clothes-food). 少年不知愁滋味 (shao4 nian2 bu4 zhi1 chou2 zi1 wei4 = young-years-no-know-sadnes-rich-taste) = in youth, you don't know what sadness tastes like.

Having experienced 憂愁 (you1 chou2 = anxieties-worries), 哀愁 (ai1 chou2 = sorrows-dejections), we know 酒入愁腸愁更愁 (ji3 ru4 chou2 chang2 chou2 geng4 chou2 = wine-into-sad-bowels-sad-even-more-sad) = drinking only makes you sadder.

天愁地慘 (tian1 chou2 di4 can3 = heaven-sad-earth-woeful) describes earthquake-stricken terrifying landscape. Poet raises glass: 與爾同銷萬古愁 (yu2 er3 tong2 xiao1 wan4 gu3 chou2 = with-you-together-forget-ten-thousand-ages-sadness = Let's drown our eternal sorrow in wine!)

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