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 making friends

友
Putonghua pronunciation: you3
Cantonese pronunciation: yau5
Meanings: friend, befriend

Pictogram of character 友 shows two hands touching. 友人 (you3 ren2 = friend-person) = 朋友 (peng2 you3 = associate-friend) = friend. 友愛 (you3 ai4 = friend-love) = loving friendship. Adult calls child, “小朋友!” (xiao3 peng2 you3 = little-friend = “Hi, kid!”)

交友 (jiao1 you3 = cross/link-friends = making friends) requires wisdom: 相識 (xiang1 shi1 = mutual-know = acquaintance), 好友 (hao3 you3 = good-friend), 諏友 (zheng4 you3 = criticism-friend = friend offering honest criticism/advice). Fools 敵友不分 (di2 you3 bu4 fen1 = enemy-friend-no-distinguish = can’t distinguish enemies from friends).


by Diana Yue