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 drinking

喝 (he1, drink) has radical 口 (kou3, mouth). When 口渴 (kou3 ke1 = mouth-thirsty), we 喝水 (he1 shui3 = drink-water), 喝茶 (he1 cha2 = drink-tea). Dating usually begins with 喝咖啡 (he1 ka1 fei1 = drink-“coffee”-transliterated = going to a coffee place).

Hunger-striker 不吃不喝 (bu1 chi1 bu1 he1 = won’t-eat-won’t-drink). Dandy 吃喝玩樂 (chi1 he1 wan2 le4 = eat-drink-play-merry = indulges in feasting and merry-making). Lonely drinker 喝個酒 (he1 men4 jiu3 = drink-bored-liquor/wine = drinks without purpose/pleasure) until 喝醉 (he1 zui4 = drink-drunken = drunk).

喝 (he4) means shout/holler. Elated audience 喝采 (he4 cai3 = shout-applause). Rude boss 呼喝 (hu1 he4 = exhale-shout = shout orders to), 喝罵 (he1 ma4 = loudly-scold/slam) subordinates.

by Diana Yue