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 studying and exams

静
Putonghua pronunciation: jing4
Cantonese pronunciation: jing3
Meanings: motionless, calm, quiet, soundless

Taiji/Tai-chi practitioner 平心靜氣 (ping2 xin1 jing4 qi4 = level/peace-heart-calm-energy = stays un-agitated/calm), 以靜制動 (yi3 jing4 zhi4 dong4 = with-non/slow-motion-control-motion = slowly/coolyly subdues fast-moving opponent).
Library sign says “肅靜” (su4 jing4 = reverent/stern-quiet = “Observe silence”), forbids 嘈吵 (cao2 chao3 = noisy-shout/quarrel = noisy speech), 喧噪 (zao4 yin1 = noisy-sounds).
Students 靜靜地 (jing4 jing4 di0 = quiet-quiet-ly = quietly) study.

by Diana Yue