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: yin3
Cantonese pronunciation: yan2
Meanings: vanish, hide, conceal, disappear, unclear, hermitage

隱 = 隱藏 (yin3 cang2 = vanish~hide), 隱蔽 (yin3 bi4 = hidden/ covered), 隱瞞 (yin3 man3 = hide~conceal), 隱約 (yin3 yue1 = hidden~appropriate = vague). 若隱若現 (ruo4 yin3 ruo4 xian4 = resemble~hidden~resemble~exposed) describes vague apparition.

隱血 (yin3 xue3 = hidden~blood) = occult blood. 私隱 (si1 yin3 = private~hidden) = personal secret/privacy. 難言之隱 (nan2 yan2 zhi1 yin3 = difficult~speak~’s hidden) = unmentionable secret.

Magician 隱身 (yin3 shen1 = hide~body = vanishes himself). Tired hero 退隱 (tui4 yin3 = retires~vanishes), becomes 隱士 (yin3 shi4 = hide~scholar = hermit). 大隱隱於市 (da4 yin3 yin3 yu1 shi4 = great~hermit~hides~in~city) means the best form of hermitage/hiding is 隱居 (yin3 ju1 = hide~abode = living inconnu/secretly) among city-dwellers.

by Diana Yue