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 bachelors and spinsters

獨
Putonghua pronunciation: du2
Cantonese pronunciation: duk6
Meanings: single, alone


獨裁者 (du2 cai2 zhe3 = single-judge-person) = dictator. 獨立 (du2 li4 = alone-stand) = standing alone or having independent means/status. China will not tolerate 台獨 (Tai2 du2 = “Tai”-wan-independence).

Bachelor獨來獨往 (du2 lai2 du2 wang3 = single-come-single-go = goes places alone), feels 孤獨 (gu1 du2 = orphan-single = lonely), sighs: 獨酌無歡! (du2 zuo2 wu2 huan1 = single-pour-wine-has-no-mirth = “Drinking/eating alone is no fun!”)

by Diana Yue