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 old people

Putonghua pronunciation: shuai1
Cantonese pronunciation: sui1
Meanings: decline, wane, deteriorate, dwindle, weaken, worn, bad

衰 (radical 衣 yil, coat) means decline/wane: 衰弱 (shuai1 ruo4 = deteriorating-weak), 衰老 (shuai1 lao3 = weaken-age), 衰草 (shuai1 cao3 = withered-grass), 衰翁 (shuai1 weng1 = feeble/fragile-old-man). However, in Cantonese 衰人 (Cantonese sui1 yan4) means bad/naughty/exasperating person.

Glamorous woman fears 年老色衰 (nian2 lao3 se1 shuai1 = age-old-color-decline = aging, losing good looks). 难盛陽衰 (yin1 sheng4 yang2 shuai1 = yin/female-principle-robust-yang/male-principle-weak) describes women outnumbering men.

盛極而衰 (sheng4 ji2 er2 shuai1 = prosper-ultimate-then-decline) = peak then fall. Historian marks civilizations’盛衰 (sheng4 shuai1 = waxing and waning). In 經濟衰退 (jing1 ji4 shuai1 tui4 = economy-decline-retreat = economic recession), cities 衰落 (shuai1 luo4 = deteriorate-fall = decline), businesses 衰亡 (shuai1 wang2 = decline-die/perish).

by Diana Yue