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 New York

市
Putonghua pronunciation: shì
Cantonese pronunciation: si5
Meaning: city, market

市 means noisy gathering place: 市場 (shi4 chang3 = market), 市集 (shi4 ji2 = market-assemble = country market, fair), 城市 (cheng2 shi4 = wall-town/city = town/city), 市長 (shi4 zhang3 = town/city-mayor), 市民 (shi4 min2 = towns-people, citizens). 市中心 (shi4 zhong1 xin1 = city-central-heart) = city-centre/downtown.

Shops on strike 罷市 (ba4 shi4 = stop-doing-business). In quiet 樓市 (lou2 shi4 = house/property/real-estates-market), commodities 有價無市 (you3 jia4 wu2 shi4 = has-price-has-no-market = have firm prices but no buyers).

股市 (gu3 shi = stock market) fluctuates: 牛市 (niu2 shi4 = bull's-market), 熊市 (xiong2 shi4 = bear's-market), 升市 (sheng1 shi4 = rising-market), 跌市 (die4 shi4 = falling-market). 收市 (shou4 shi4 = withdraw-market) = market closes.

by Diana Yue