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

身
Putonghua pronunciation: shen1
Cantonese pronunciation: san1
Meanings: body

身 = body/body’s condition. 身體好 (shen1 ti3 hao3 = body~body-good) = healthy. 身份 (shen1 fen4 = body~role) = status. Boyfriend/rapist makes girl 失身 (shi1 shen1 = lose-body = lose her virginity). 過身 (guo4 shen1 = pass-body) = die. 身後事 (shen1 hou4 shi4 = body-behind/afterwards-affairs) = deceased person’s funeral arrangements.

After 健身 (jian4 shen1 = strengthen-body = doing physical/body-building exercises), athlete 一身是汗 (yi1 shen1 shi4 han4 = one/whole-body-is-sweat = sweats all over). Model 轉身 (zhuan3 shen1 = turn-body = turns around), displays good 身材 (shen1 cai2 = body~trunk = figure).

單身漢 (dan1 shen1 han4 = single-body-man = bachelor) sticks to 獨身主義 (du2 shen1 zu3 yi4 = alone-body-main-meaning) = principle/practice of remaining single.

by Diana Yue