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 cosmetic surgery

削
Putonghua pronunciation: xiao1, xue1
Cantonese pronunciation: seuk3
Meaning: cut, pare, reduce, weaken

削 (radical 刀 = dao1, knife/blade) pronounced “xiao1” means cut/pare: 削刀 (xiao1 dao1 = paring-knife), 削皮 (xiao1 pi2 = pare-off-skin), 削铅笔 (xiao1 qian1 bi3 = pare-lead-pen = sharpen pencil with knife/pencil-sharpen).

削 pronounced “xue1” means cut/reduce. 瘦削 (shou4 xue1 = thin-bony) = gaunt-looking. Foreman 削剥 (bo1 xue1 = peel-pare = exploits) workers, 削减 (xue1 jian3 = cut-reduce) wages, 削弱 (xue1 ruo4 = reduce-weaken) company's reputation, got 削职 (xue1 zhi2 = cut-post = sacked). 削足适履 (xue1 zu2 jiu4 lü3 = cut-foot-accommodate-shoe) means cutting expenses to fit budget.

整容醫生 (zheng3 rong2 yil sheng1 = reconstruct/reform-face/appearance-medical-member = cosmetic surgeon) performs 削骨手術 (xiao1 gu3 shou3 shu4 = pare-bone-hand-method = osteotomy) to reduce huge nose.

by Diana Yue