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

Putonghua pronunciation: sheng4
Cantonese pronunciation: sing6
Meanings: remaining, remnant, left, left behind, surplus

剩 = 剩餘 (remaining-surplus). 剩下 (sheng4 xia4 = remain-down) = leave/left behind. Sale clears 剩貨 (sheng4 huo4 = remaining-goods). 剩餘價值 (sheng4 yu2 jia4 zhi2 = left-over-price-worth) = surplus value.

Diners pack 剩菜 (sheng4 cai4 = remain-cooked-vegi/dishes = leftovers). Refugees lament demolished motherland’s 殘山剩水 (can2 shan1 sheng4 shui3 = incomplete/ruined-hills-leftover-waters = devastated territory/landscape).

男大當婚, 女大當嫁 (nan2 da4 dang1 hun1, nü3 da4 dang1 jia4 = man~big-should-marry, woman~big-should-wed = When men/women grow up, they should get married). However, 剩男剩女 (sheng4 nan2 sheng4 nü3 = leftover-men~leftover~women = bachelors/spinsters who missed marriage chances) are common because eligible candidates 所剩無幾 (suo3 sheng4 wu2 ji3 = what’s-left-not-many = not too many are left).

by Diana Yue