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 donations

Putonghua pronunciation: jüăn1
Cantonese pronunciation: guen1
Meanings: abandon, sacrifice, contribute, donate, buy

捐 (radical 手 = hand shou3) = 捐出 (jüăn1 chü1 = surrender-out = sacrifice/donate).

Patriot 為國捐軀 (wei4 guo2 jüăn1 qü1 = for-country-sacrifice-body = dies for country), 捐棄前嫌 (jüăn1 qi4 qian2 xian2 = abandon-discard-previous-dislikes) describes antagonists dropping mutual dislikes.

Fund-raisers 募捐 (mu4 jüăn1 = seek-donors/donations), Philanthropists 捐錢 (jüăn1 qian2 = donate-money/funds), Charities need 捐助 (jüăn1 zhu4 = donations-aid). Hospitals need 捐血 (jüăn1 xue3 = give-blood = blood donations), 捐精 (jüăn1 jing1 = donate-sperms = sperm donations), 捐骨髓 (jüăn1 gu3 sui3 = donate-bone-marrow = bone marrow donations).

捐贈器官 (jüăn1 zheng4 qi4 guan1 = donate-give-instrument-official) = organ donation. However, 捐官 (jüăn1 guan1 = donate-official) means paying bribes to obtain an official post.

by Diana Yue