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

抽
Putonghua pronunciation: chou1
Cantonese pronunciation: chau1
Meaning: draw, suck, take, pull, select, pick, extract, remove

抽 (radical 手 shou3, hand) = 抽出 (chou1 chu1 = draw/pull/pick-out), 抽去 (chou1 qū4 = draw/take-off/away). Seeds 抽芽 (chou1 ya2 = pull-young-shoot = bud). Pumps 抽水 (chou1 shui3 = extract/pump-away-water). 抽血 (chou1 xuè3 = extract-blood) = blood-taking. 抽屉 (chou1 ti4 = draw-enclosed-container) = drawer.

Detective 抽絲剝繭 (chou1 si1 bo1 jian3 = pull-out-silk-open-up-cocoon = conducts skilled/detailed investigation), pieces 抽象 (chou1 xiang4 = extract-image = abstract/vague) clues together, 抽空 (chou1 kong1 = takes-a-while/break), 抽煙 (chou1 yan1 = suck-smoke = smokes a cigarette).

Scared woman 抽泣 (chou1 xī1 = draw-in-weep = gasps tearfully) because 抽脂 (chou1 zhi1 = suction-assisted-fat-removal = lipoplasty/"lipo") operation causes 肌肉抽搐 (ji1 rou4 chou1 chu4 = muscle-flesh-pull-flinch = muscle spasms).

by Diana Yue