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 winter grandchildren

孫
Putonghua pronunciation: sun1
Cantonese pronunciation: suen1
Meaning: grandchild

孫 (radical 子 zi3, son/fruit) means offspring two generations down: 孫兒 (sun1 er2 = grand-child), 孫子 (sun1 zi3 = grand-son), 孫女 (sun1 nü3 = grand-daughter), 內孫 (nei4 sun1 = internal/son’s-children), 外孫 (wai4 sun1 = external/daughter’s-children), 重孫 (chong2 sun1 = double-grandchild) = grandchild’s child.

Couple 抱孫 (bao4 sun1 = hold/carry-grandchild = become grandparents) when son/daughter has a baby. Grandparents 含饴弄孫 (han2 yi2 nong4 sun1 = taste-candy-toy-grandchild = enjoy fondling grandchild). Baby-sitting grandma jokes: “I’m 孫嬸 (sun1 yong1 = grandchild’s-servant/maid!”

In patriarchic society, king passes throne to 長子嫡孫 (zhang2 zi3 di2 sun1 = eldest-son-direct-line-grandson = eldest son and his eldest son), wants 子孫孫 (zi3 zi3 sun1 sun1 = son-son-grandson-grandson = family lineage) to rule forever.

by Diana Yue