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 \ 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 walls

倒
Putonghua pronunciation: dao 3
Cantonese pronunciation: do 2
Meanings: fall, collapse, bend, reverse

Intransitive verb 倒 means fall. Termite-eaten wall 倒下 (dao3 xia4 = falls-down). Earthquake-struck buildings 倒塌 (dao3 ta1 = fall-collapse). Failed companies 倒閉 (dao3 bi4 = fall-close = close down). 9-0 is一面倒 (yi2 mian4 dao3 = one-side-bend = lop-sided) score.

Transitive verb 倒 = pour: 倒茶 (doa2 cha2 = pour-tea), 倒粪 (dao3 fen4 = pour-away-faeces = clear night-soil tubs).

Adverb 倒 = reverse: Eve’s 倒數 (dao3 shu4 = reverse-count = count-down), GDP’s 倒退 (dao3 tui4 = reverse-retreat = shrink). Scalpers 倒賣 (dao3 mai4 = reverse-sell = re-sell for profit). Uncompromised, negotiations 拉倒 (la1 dao3 = pull-down = break down).

Bankrupt families/institutions 樹倒猢狲散 (shu4 dao3 hu2 sun1 san4 = tree-falls~mon-keys-disperse = collapse/disintegrate, lose all supporters/dependents).

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