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 hope

期

Putonghua pronunciation: qi1
Cantonese pronunciation: kei4
Meaning: period, date, expect, expectation

期 (radical 月 yue4, moon) means 時期 (shi2 qi1 = time-period), 日期 (ri4 qi1 = day-period = date). 期刊 (qi1 kan1 = periodical/journal). 期货 (qi1 huo4 = period-goods = futures) are 長期 (chang2 qi1 = long-term) investments. Marriages have 蜜月期 (mi4 yue4 qi1 = honey-moon-periods), 冷戰期 (leng3 zhan4 qi1 = cold-war-periods).

期待 (qi1 dai4 = period-wait) means expect/long for. Strangers 不期而遇 (bu4 qi1 er2 yu4 = un-expected/premeditated-and/but-meet = accidentally meet). Construction 如期完成 (ru2 qi1 wan2 cheng2 = as-period/longing-finish-succeed = is completed on time). Old-maid 嫁杏無期 (jia4 xing4 wu2 qi1 = marry/wed-apricot-has-no-date = has no marriage prospects). Sick pilgrims 期望 (qi1 wang4 = period/longing-look = hope/wish for) miracle-cure.

by Diana Yue