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 longevity

延 (radical 延 yin2, go) means continue/extend. Forests 绵延 (mian2 yan2 = connect-continue = stretch) for miles, Drought-period 延长 (yan2 chang2 = is extended-prolonged). Forest-fires 蔓延 (man4 yan2 = tendril-extend = spread), threatening wildlife’s 延续 (yan2 xù2 = regeneration-continued-existence).

Filibusters 拖延 (tuo1 yan2 = drag-on-prolong) discussions. Unfinished meeting 順延 (shun4 yan2 = smooth-postpone = by agenda, will continue) next week. Budget approvals 延期 (yan2 qi1 = extend-period = are delayed). Malpractice 延伸 (yan2 shen1 = is extended-proliferated), 禍延後代 (huo4 yan2 hou4 dai4 = calamities-extend-later-generation = affects the future negatively).

Exercising can 延遲 (yan2 chi2 = prolong-late = delay) ageing, 益壽延年 (yi1 shou4 yan2 nan2 = benefit-longevity-extend-years/age = make you live better and longer).

by Diana Yue