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 pretty women

求 (qiú2)
Putonghua pronunciation: qiú2
Cantonese pronunciation: kau4
Meaning: request, seek, search, ask for favor, beg, beseech, need, demand

求 = 請求 (qīng3 qiú2 = request-ask), 哀求 (ā1 qiú2 = sorrowfully/desperately-beg), 需求 (xū1 qiú2 = need-demand). Students 求學 (qiú2 xué2 = pursue-studies), 求職 (qiú2 zhí2 = seek-employment/jobs). Patients 求醫 (qiú2 yī1 = seek-medical-treatment). Titanic 求救 (qiú2 jiù4 = asks-for-help, sends SOS). Detectives 求證 (qiú2 zhèng4 = look-for-evidence). Many pretty girls 求名求利 (qiú2 míng2 qiú2 lì4 = seek-fame-seek-fortune), so starlets 供過於求 (gōng1 guō4 yū1 qiú2 = supply-exceeds-demand).

Bachelor 求偶 (qiú2 ǒu3 = looks-for-partner/spouse), 求愛 (qiú2 ài4 = beg-love = woos) girl, 求歡 (qiú2 huān1 = beg-pleasure = asks for sex), 求婚 (qiú2 hūn1 = beg-marry = proposes): “求你嫁給我!” (qiú2 nǐ3 jiā4 gēi2 wǒ3 = beg-you-marry-to-me!)

by Diana Yue