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 doors

Putonghua pronunciation: guan1
Cantonese pronunciation: gwaan1
Meanings: shut, close, imprison, mountain pass, entry-exit point, link

關 = shut/close: 關窗 (guan1 chuang1 = shut-window), 關機 (guan1 jii1 = shut-down-machine/computer). 關門 (guan1 men2 = shut-door) also means closing down business/organization.

Parents 被關 (bei4 guan1 = receive-closed-doors = are imprisoned).

Parents 關心 (guan1 xin1 = link-heart = care about) love-sick daughter trapped in 情關 (qing2 guan1 = love’s-prison/pass).

Strategist grasps 關鍵 (guan1 jian4 = entry-exit-key = crucial) moment to act. Like attacking army, researchers 關閉 (chuang3 guan1 = charge-guarded-mountain-pass = try ambitious step to find important solution).

Businessmen need 關係 (guan1 xi4 = joint-link = links/networking/guanxi). Drug-carrier held when 過海關 (guo4 hai3 guan1 = go-through-sea-pass = going through customs) asserts: “與我無關!” (yu2 wo3 wu2 guan1 = with-me-none-relationship = “I ain’t involved!”)

by Diana Yue