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

千 (radical 十 shi2, ten) = thousand: 千元鈔 (qian1 yuán2 chao1 = thousand-dollar-banknote), 千米 (qian1 mi3 = thousand-meters = 公里 gong1 li2 = universal-mile = kilometer), 千克 (qian1 ke1 = thousand-grams = 公斤 gong1 jin1 = universal-catty = kilogram), 千年蟲 (qian1 jian2 chong2 = thousand-year/millennium-bug).

Wedding-night 一刻千金 (yi1 ke1 qian1 jin1 = one-moment-thousand-gold-pieces) is most treasurable. 千金 (qian1 jin1 = thousand-gold-pieces) also means respectable person/friend’s daughter. 千里馬 (qian1 li3 ma3 = thousand-mile-horse) means fast/sturdy stallion or talented person destined to go far.

Leader bears 千斤重擔 (qian1 jin1 zhong4 dan4 = thousand-catty-heavy-burden = great responsibilities). Critics assess his 千秋功罪 (qian1 qiu1 gong1 zui4 = thousand-autumns- achievements-crimes = achievements/faults in historical perspective).

by Diana Yue