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 winter grandchildren

爺 (radical 父 fu4, father) = grandfather/senior/god. Grand-kids play with 爺爺 (ye2 ye0 = grandpa) and grandpa’s friend 王爺爺 (Wang2 Ye2 Ye0 = Wang-grandpa = old Mr, Wang). Photo shows 爺孫三代 (ye2 sun1 san1 dai4 = grandpa-grandson-three-generations = three generations of the family).

老爺 (lao3 ye2 = old-grandpa) = master/bureaucrat-in-charge. 王爺府 (wang2 ye2 fu3 = king/prince-grandpa-residence) = prince’s palace. Hunting is 爺們 (ye2 men2 = grandpa-plural = lords/men’s) sport.

Worshippers believe 老天爺 (lao3 tian1 ye2 = old-heaven-grandpa = Heaven), 佛爺 (fo2 ye2 = old-Buddha-grandpa = merciful Buddha) hear their prayers, 閻王爺 (yan2 wang2 ye2 = Hell-grandpa) = King/ruler of Hell. Beggar implores: “大爺 (da4 ye2 = big-grandpa = sir), spare a dime!”

by Diana Yue