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 group tours

行 (radical 行 chu4, walk slowly) pronounced “hang2” means row/line, profession or commercial building. 行 pronounced “xing2” means go/walk/travel: 行走 (xing2 zou3 = walk-run), 旅行 (lü2 xing2 = tour-travel), 远行 (yuan3 xing2 = distant/long-journey), 行动 (xing2 dong4 = walk-movement/action), 衣食住行 (yi1 shi2 zhu4 xing2 = clothes-food-reside-commuting/traveling) are essential expenses.

旅行社 (lü3 xing2 she4 = travel-agency) announces 行程 (xing2 cheng2 = travel-route/itinerary), 旅馆 (lü3 guan3 = travel-house = hotels/inns). Tourists prepare 行装 (xing2 zhuang1 = travel-clothes), 行李 (xing2 li3 = travel-things = luggage), request visiting 步行街 (bu4 xing2 jie1 = step-walk-street = pedestrian street/zone).

How’s the sightseeing? “行!” (xing2, go = OK/Good!) How’s the food? “不行!” (bu4 xing2 = No-good!)

by Diana Yue