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

鎖 (radical 金 jin1 = gold/metal)
Putonghua pronunciation: suo3
Cantonese pronunciation: soh2
Meanings: lock, key, enchain

鎖匠 (suo3 jiang4 = lock-smith) opens 鎖 with 鑰匙 (yao4 shi4 = bolt-key = key). To open 數碼鎖 (shu4 ma3 suo3 = number-code-lock = digital lock) of 夾萬 (jia1 wan4 = clamp/squeeze-ten-thousand = safes), press 預設密碼 (yu4 she4 mi4 ma3 = pre-set-secret-code).

鎖骨 (suo3 gu3 = lock-bone) = collar-bone. 心鎖 (xin1 xuo3 = heart-lock) = unbreakable emotional fixation. Marksmen/squad 鎖定 (suo3 ding4 = lock-fix = fixes on) target. 鎖國政策 (suo3 guo2 zheng4 ce4 = lock-nation-rule-strategy = closed-door policy) produces 連鎖反應 (lian2 suo3 fan3 ying4 = link-chain-reverse-echo = chain effects).

Slaves wear 鎖鏈 (suo3 lian4 = locked-shackles/chains). Revolutionary masses break 枷鎖 (jia1 suo3 = yoke-lock = oppressive constraint) of feudal system/thinking.

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