Character Builder

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 royal weddings

Putonghua pronunciation: gui4
Cantonese pronunciation: gwai3
Meanings: distinguished, noble, precious, valuable

貴 means elevated/valuable: 寶貴 (bao3 gui4 = precious- valuable) time/asset, 珍貴 (zhen1 gui4 = rare- valuable) memories/collections, 貴重 (gui4 zhong4 = precious- significant) gifts, 昂貴 (ang2 gui4 = high- costly) expenses. 貴賓廳 (gui4 bin1 ting1 = distinguished-guest-hall) = VIP room/lounge.

公 (gong1, duke), 侯 (hou2, marquis), 伯 (bo2, earl/count), 子 (zi3, viscount) 男 (nan2, baron) are 貴族 (gui4 zu2 = noble-tribe = aristocracy), members of 上議院 (shang4 yi4 yuan4 = high/up-discuss-court = Parliament’s Upper House). 貴婦 (gui4 fu4 = expensive-woman) = extravagantly-dressed woman or lady with upper-class upbringing/airs.

Masses envy 顯貴 (xian3 gui4 = distinguished-upper-class) families, 權貴 (quan2 gui4 = powerful/privileged-distinguished people). Egalitarians preach 人無分貴賤 (ren2 wu2 fen1 gui4 jian4 = people/mankind-no-divide-high-class-low-class = all men are equal).

by Diana Yue