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 graduation

Putonghua pronunciation: wei4
Cantonese pronunciation: wai3
Meanings: console, comfort, feel comforted, glad

慰 (radical 心 xin1, heart) = verb 安慰 (an1 wei4 = calm-console = comfort), adjective 欣慰 (xin1 wei4 = glad-consoled). Visitor 慰問 (wei4 wen4 = comfort-ask = consoles) hospitalized patient. Praying churchgoer feels God’s 撫慰 (fu3 wei4 = touch-console = consoling touch). Boss throws party to 慰勞 (wei4 lao2 = console-labor = thank/encourage) prize-winning team.

World denounces Japanese soldiers for using female-prisoners as 慰安婦 (wei4 an1 fu4 = console-comfort-women = comfort women) in WWII. 自慰 (zi4 wei4 = self-consolation) also means masturbation.

Nobel-winner’s parents 老懷大慰 (lao3 huai2 da4 wei4 = old-bosoms-big-comfort = wonderfully happy in old age), feel可告慰於先人 (ke3 gao4 wei4 yu1 xian1 ren2 = can-tell/bring-comfort-to-predecessors-people = this will please our ancestors).

by Diana Yue