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 old family money

風

Putonghua pronunciation: feng1
Cantonese pronunciation: fung1
Meanings: wind, style, trend

風 means air current, style, trend: venue/cuisine’s 風味 (feng1 wei4 = style-taste = taste/charm), writer's 文風 (wen2 feng1 = literary-style), society’s 風俗 (feng1 su2 = wind-secular/convention = conventions), 風氣 (feng1 qi4 = trend-breath = moral culture). 風言風語 (feng1 yan2 feng1 yu3 = wind-words-wind-speech) = rumors.

In old China educated families observe 舊家風 (jiu4 jia1 feng1 = passé-family-style = traditional familial practices, e.g. 敬老 (jing4 lao3 = respecting-elders), 請安 (qing3 an1 = request-calm = giving deferential obeisances).

Distinguished family upholds 家風 (jia1 feng1 = family-style = family’s moral requirements), wants sons/daughters to be 風雅 (feng1 ya3 = wind/poetic-elegant = cultured/refined), become society's 風雲人物 (feng1 yun2 ren2 wu4 = winds-clouds-person-object = powerful/influential personalities).

by Diana Yue