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 adultery

三 (three strokes) means three/third: 三人 (san1 ren2 = three-people), 三月 (san1 yue4 = third-lunar-month or March), 三次 (san1 ci4 = three-times).


第三者 (di4 san1 zhe3 = number-three-person = a third person) hurts couple's harmonious relationship. Mainland Chinese term 小三 (xiao3 san1 = small-three/third) means married man’s 情婦 (qing2 fu4 = love-affair-woman = mistress), i.e. Hongkong term 二奶 (er4 nai3 = second-woman), i.e. 小老婆 (xiao3 lao3 po2 = small/minor-old-granny = ex-marital “wife”).

by Diana Yue