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 diplomatic relations

**鄰**

Putonghua pronunciation: lin2
Cantonese pronunciation: lün4
Meanings: neighbor, neighboring, near-by


Sage says: 遠親不如近鄰 (yüan3 qin1 bu4 ru2 jin4 lin2 = distant-family-relative-no-compare-near-by-neighbor = neighbors provide more support/friendship than faraway family), advises 睦鄰 (mu4 lin2 = warm/kind-neighbor = showing actions/gestures to befriend neighbors).

Neighboring states 接壤 (jie2 rang4 = touch-territories), share國界 (guo2 jie4 = state-borders). But 強鄰 (qiang2 lin2 = strong/powerful-neighbor) thinks 遠交近攻 (yüan jiao1 jin4 gong1 = far-off-befriend-near-by-attack = befriending far-off states, attacking/invading neighboring state) is clever aggression tactics.

by Diana Yue