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 heat waves

暑 (radical 日 ri4, sun)
Putonghua pronunciation: shu3
Cantonese pronunciation: sue2
Meanings: hot weather, summer heat

寒暑 (han2 shu3 = cold-hot) = temperature range. 寒暑表 (han2 shu3 biao3 = cold-hot-measure) = thermometer.

In Chinese calendar's 二十四节气 (er4 shi2 si4 jie2 qi4 = two-ten-four-season-weather = twenty-four solar terms), 小暑 (xiao2 shu3 = minor-heat), appr. 7 July, is day when heat starts becoming unbearable, 大暑 (da4 shu3 = major-heat), appr. 23 July, is day when heat reaches year's most powerful point.

In 暑天 (shu3 tian1 = heat-sky/days = dog days), 暑气 (shu3 qi4 = hot-weather-energy/effect) rises, we 放暑假 (fang4 shu3 jia4 = relieve-summer-vacation = take summer leave), drink herbal drinks to 解暑 (jie3 shu3 = dissolve/counteract-the-heat), swarm to 避暑勝地 (bi4 shu3 sheng4 di4 = avoid-heat-win-place = nice summer retreats).

by Diana Yue