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 royal weddings

Putonghua pronunciation: she1
Cantonese pronunciation: che1
Meanings: excessive, extravagant

奢 = 奢侈 (she1 chi3 = excessive-big/luxury) = extravagance. 名牌 (ming2 pai2 = name-brands) are 奢侈品 (she1 chi3 pin3 = extravagant-items = luxury goods). Nouveau riche love 奢華 (she1 hua2 = luxurious-grandeur). Mouse 奢望 (she1 wang4 = excessive-hope = unrealistically hopes to) beat cat, 奢談 (she1 tan2 = excessive-talk = brags about) becoming king of beasts.

Puritanical couple 不驕不奢 (bu4 jiao1 bu4 she1 = not-arrogant-not-extravagant = act/spend modestly), dislike 窮奢極侈 (qiong2 she1 ji2 chi3 = exhaust-luxury-ultimate-extravagant = extremely extravagant) weddings.

Sage warns: 由儉入奢易 (you2 jian4 ru4 she1 yi4 = from-frugal-into-luxurious-easy = increasing spending is easy), 由奢入儉難 (you2 she1 ru4 jian4 nan2 = from-luxurious-into-frugal-difficult = cutting spending is hard).

by Diana Yue