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 job-hunting

求 = verb 請求 (qing3 qiu2 = request/beg), noun 需求 (xü1 qiu2 = need-demand). 供過於求 (gong1 guo4 yü1 qiu2 = supply-exceeds-demand). Students 求學 (qiu2 xüe2 = pursue-studies), later 求職 (qiu2 zhi2 = seek-employment/jobs).


Social climber 追求 (zui1 qiu2 = pursue-seek = pursues) fame/fortune. Lover 求愛 (qiu2 ai4 = beg-love = woos) girl, 求歡 (qiu2 huan1 = beg-pleasure = wants sex).

To implore, say “求求你!” (qiu2 qiu2 ni3 = beg-beg-you!) Sage advises: 無欲無求 (wu2 yü4 wu2 qiu2 = no-desire-no-longings = lustless) is best.

by Diana Yue