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 housing

房 (radical 户 hu4, door-panel) = 房子 (fang2 zi0 = house-diminutive) = 房屋 (fang2 wu1 = house-house) = houses: 平房 (ping2 fang2 = level/low-rise-houses), 民房 (min2 fang2 = civilians’ houses), 屠房 (tu2 fang2 = slaughter-house).

房間 (fang2 jian1 = house-partition) = 房: 睡房 (shui4 fang2 = sleeping/bed-room), 廚房 (chu2 fang2 = kitchen-room). 新房 (xin1 fang2 = new/bridal-chamber) is where newly-weds 洞房 (dong4 fang2 = hole-room = spend wedding night). Polygamous man has 長房 (zhang3 fang2 = first-room = number-one-wife-and-offsprings) and concubines.

房地產 (fang2 di4 chan3 = house-land-property) = real estate. Government modifies 房屋政策 (fang2 wu1 zheng4 ce4 = houses-administration-strategy = housing policy) to tackle 房荒 (fang2 huang1 = houses-famine = housing shortage).

by Diana Yue