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:

1<sup>st</sup> tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2<sup>nd</sup> tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3<sup>rd</sup> tone: 3 = diacritical mark \U00000001 pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4<sup>th</sup> 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 short lives

Putonghua pronunciation: duan3
Cantonese pronunciation: duen2
Meaning: short, shortcoming, missing, unjustified

短 (矢 chi3, arrow + 豆 dou4, bean) means short: 長短 (chang2 duan3 = long-short = length), 短髮 (duan3 fa3 = short-hair), 短期 (duan3 qi1 = short-term), 短訊 (duan3 xün4 = on-line short-messages).

短處 (duan3 chu4 = short-place) = shortcomings. 說人長短 (shuo1 ren2 chang2 duan3 = talk-people-long-short) means gossiping about others’ merits/faults. Widow may 寻短見 (xün2 duan3 jian4 = seek-short-view = commit suicide) if her only son runs into 三長兩短 (san1 chang2 liang3 duan3 = three-long-two-short = fatal mishaps).

Mozart 短命 (duan3 ming4 = short-life = died young). Poet laments: 人生苦短 (ren2 sheng1 ku3 duan3 = human-life-bitter-short = Life is lamentably short!) Happiness is 短暫 (duan3 zan4 = short-fleeting/temporary!)

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