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 raising families

妻 (radical 女 nü3, woman) = 妻子 (qi1 zi0 = wife-diminutive = wife): 夫妻 (fu1 qi1 = husband-wife = married couple), 娶妻 (qū3 qi1 = marries/takes-wife). 一夫多妻制 (yī fu1 duō1 qi1 zhì4 = one-husband-many-wives-system) = polygamy. In old China, man has 髮妻 (fa4 qi1 = hair-wife = first/legal wife whose hair-lock is presented at wedding), 娘 (qie4, concubines).

Cruel man 虐妻 (nüé4 qi1 = maltreats/abuses-wife), 休妻 (xiū1 qi1 = rest/disengage-wife = divorces wife), eventually 妻离子散 (qi1 li2 zi3 san4 = wife-leaves-son-disperse) = family breaks up.

Decent man appreciates 賢妻 (xian2 qi1 = good/supportive-wife), calls her “愛妻” (ài4 qi1 = love-wife = “My beloved-wife”, doesn’t bad-mouth 前妻 (qian2 qi1 = ex-wife).

by Diana Yue