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 foreign maids

約 (radical 系 xi4, strap) means strapping/binding. 約定 (yue1 ding4 = agree-determine) = agree. 約會 (yue1 hui4 = agree-to-meet) = appointment/date. 守約 (shou3 yue1 = keep-appointment), 失約 (shi1 yue1 = miss/skip-appointment).

Parties 訂約 (ding4 yue1 = formulate-agreement), 簽約 (qian1 yue1 = sign-agreement): 國際條約 (guo2 ji4 tiao2 yue1 = states-among-term/item-agreement = international treaty), 國際公約 (guo2 ji4 gong1 yue1 = states-among-common-agreement = international convention), 買賣合約 (mai3 mai3 he2 yue1 = buy-sell-joint-agreement = purchase contract).

僱傭合約 (gu4 yong1 he2 yue1 = employer-employee-joint-agreement = employment contract) 約束 (yue1 shu4 = contract-bind = binds/restricts) parties’ actions. Party which 毀約 (hui3 yue1 = breaks-contract) or 違約 (wei2 yue1 = disobeys/violates-contract = defaults) is penalized.

by Diana Yue