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 PRC’s 60th year

放 (fang 4)
Cantonese pronunciation: fong 3
Meanings: drop, open, bloom, relax, release

放 means 放下 (fang xia 44 = put-down), 放棄 (fang qi 44 = forsake/abandon). Shepherds 放羊 (fang yang 42 = release sheep/goats to graze). “放心!” (fang xin 41 = drop/relax~heart) means “Put yourself at ease!”

Playboys lead 放縱 (fang zong 44 = free-indulgent = excessive) lifestyles. “易放難收!” (yi fang nan shou 4421 = easy-to-expand-difficult-to-contract/shrink) is a wise comment on over-stretched investments/spending/commitments.

Dissidents who spoke up in 1956’s “鳴放運動” (ming fang yun dong 2444 = birds-sing-flowers-bloom-movement) were later 下放 (xia fang 44 = down-release = banished). Now, 改革開放 (gai ge kai fang 3214 = alter-change-open-release = reforms and opening-up) policy fosters 開放 (kai fang 14 = open-minded-outgoing) attitude.

by Diana Yue