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 celebrations

笑 Putonghua pronunciation: xiao4
Cantonese pronunciation: siu3
Meaning: smile, laugh, laughter

笑 (radical 竹 zhu2, bamboo) means 微笑 (wei1 xiao4 = faint/slight-smile), 笑出 (xiao4 chulai2 = smile-burst-out-come = chuckle/laugh), 笑聲 (xiao4 sheng1 = laughing-sound = laughter). Guest presents gift, says “請笑納 (qing3 xiao4 na4 = please-smilingly-accept)!”


Winner 哈哈大笑 (ha1 ha1 da4 xiao4 = onomatopoeia “ha-ha”-big-laugh = laughs loudly). Stoical loser 一笑置之 (yi1 xiao4 zhi4 zhi1 = one-smile-leave-it = dismiss it with a smile).

Centenarian’s funeral is 笑喪 (xiao4 sang1 = all-smiles/happy-funeral, nothing to cry about).

by Diana Yue