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 housing


To 遷徙 (qian1 xi3 = move-exile/move) and 安置 (an1 zhi4 = safe-place/settle = settle) squatters, government built multi-storey 徙置大廈 (xi3 zhi4 da4 sha4 = move-settle-big-mansion = resettlement blocks) in 徙置區 (xi3 zhi4 qü1 = move-settle-area = resettlement estates), i.e. today’s 公共屋邨 (gong1 gong4 wu1 cun1 = public-communal-house-village = public housing estates).

Inflation-hit government 攤置 (ge1 zhi4 = put-idle-place = stalls) mega housing project but stresses budget-cut rumors 不可置信 (bu4 ke3 zhi4 xin4 = no-can-place-trust/belief = are unbelievable).

by Diana Yue