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 or 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 first-home purchases

首
Putonghua pronunciation: shou3
Cantonese pronunciation: sau2
Meaning: head, first, initial, principal, leading, beginning


罪魁禍首 (zui4 kui2 huo4 shou3 = sin/crime-first-harm-head = leading criminal) 自首 (zi4 shou3 = self-emerge = surrenders himself), escapes getting 斬首 (zan3 shou3 = chop-head = beheaded).

Hong Kong is 首屈一指 (shou3 qü1 yi1 zhi3 = first-bend-one-finger = first/top) in house-price soar. 首次買房者 (shou3 ci4 mai3 fang2 zhe3 = first-time-buy-house-person = first-time home-purchaser) pays exorbitant 首貸 (shou3 dai4 = first-mortgage).