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 regime change

頑 = stubborn/unyielding: 頑愚 (wan2 yu2 = obstinate-stupid), 頑童 (wan2 tong2 = naughty-kid). Chronic patient fights頑疾 (wan2 ji2 = stubborn-illness). Teacher punishes 頑皮 (wan2 pi2 = naughty-skin = naughty) pupil. 頑劣 (wan2 lie4 = ill-behaved-bad-quality = unruly) youths can benefit from community service. 冥頑不靈 (ming2 wan2 bu4 ling2 = dark-dumb-not-intelligent) describes people who won’t listen to reason. 頑石點頭 (wan2 shi2 dian3 tou2 = stubborn-stone-nod-head) describes hard-hearted listeners convinced/moved by master’s preaching. Protestors have頑強意志 (wan2 qiang2 yi4 zhi4 = unyielding-strong-notion-will = strong willpower), 頑抗 (wan2 kang4 = unyielding-resist = persistently fight back against) police’s clampdown. Dictator is nicknamed “老頑固” (lao3 wan2 gu4 = old-stubborn-stiff = “old bigot”).

Putonghua pronunciation: wan2
Cantonese pronunciation: waan4
Meanings: stubborn, obstinate, naughty

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