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 political parties

**内**
Putonghua pronunciation: nei4
Cantonese pronunciation: noi6
Meanings: inside, inner, internal

内 is opposite of 外 (wai4, external). 内容 (nei4 rong2 = inside-contain) = contents. 内心 (nei4 xin1 = inside-heart) = person's inner feelings. 外科 (wai4 ke1 = out-branch) = surgery, 内科 (nei4 ke1 = internal-branch) = internal medicine.

In old-fashioned/elegant parlance, “外子” (wai4 zi3 = outside-diminutive) is “my husband”, “內子” (nei4 zi3 = inside-diminutive) is “my wife”. To Chinese, 内国 (guo2 nei4 = country-inside) means inside China, 外国 (guo2 wai4 = country-outisde) = 海外 (hai3 wai4 = seas-outside) means abroad.

In political factions, 内部矛盾 (nei4 bu4 mao2 dun4 = inner-part-spear-shield = internal contradiction/discord) often cause 内斗 (nei4 dou4 = internal-struggle = internal feuds). 内鬼 (nei4 gui3 = inside-ghost) means hidden betrayer/mole.