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 raising families

Putonghua pronunciation: dan1, dan4
Cantonese pronunciation: daam3
Meanings: weight, load carried on shoulder-pole, burden

Noun 擔 (dan4) = loads (of grains/coal) suspended from two ends of shoulder-pole. 千斤重擔 (qian1 jin1 zhong4 dan4 = thousand-catties-heavy-burden) = extremely heavy burden. Verb 擔 (dan1) = carry burden. 承擔 (cheng2 dan1 = accept-shoulder) responsibility, 擔任 (dan1 ren4 = burden-act-as = serve) post, 擔保 (dan1 bao3 = burden-protect = act as guarantor).

Parents shoulder 生活擔子 (sheng1 huo2 dan4 zi0 = exist-live-burden-diminutive = burden of earning livelihood), 擔驚受怕 (dan1 jing1 shou4 pa4 = shoulder-fright-receive-fear = feel fears/worries) when child is ill, 擔心 (dan1 xin1 = burden-heart = worry/care for) children’s future.

Birth control slogan “三個斷擔挑!” (san1 ge4 duan4 dan4 dan4 tiao1 = three-kid-units-break-burden-pole) = “Having/raising three kids will make you collapse!”

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