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 New Year resolutions

Putonghua pronunciation: yuan4
Cantonese pronunciation: yuen6
Meanings: wish, hope, aspiration

願 = 願望 (yuan4 wang4 = wish-look-ahead = wish), 心願 (xin1 yuan4 = heart's-wish). 志願軍 (zhi4 yuan4 jun1 = will-aspiration-army) = volunteer army. 許願 (xu3 yuan4 = promise-wish) = make a wish.

Our 新年願望 (xin1 nian2 yuan4 wang4 = new-year-wish) is 國泰民安 (guo2 tai4 min2 an1 = country-prosper-people-safe/comfort = country prosper, people happy), 天下太平 (tian1 xia4 tai4 ping2 = heaven-below-ultimate-calm = peace on earth), 天從人願 (tian1 cong2 ren2 yuan4 = heaven-grants-everyone’s-wishes).

If bride is 不願 (bu4 yuan4 = un-willing), she won’t say “我願意!” (wo3 yuan4 yi4 = I-wish-idea = “I do!”) Prayer closes with 誠心所願 (cheng2 xin1 suo3 yuan4 = honestly-heart’s-wish = Amen).

by Diana Yue