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

政 = 政治 (zheng4 zhi4 = politics-rule/regime). 政府 (zheng4 fu3 = rule-house = government) implements 政策 (zheng4 ce4 = political-plan/strategy = policies). Hongkong is 特別行政區 (te4 bie2 xing2 zeng4 qu1 = different-other-practice-administration-region = special administrative region).

從政 (cong2 zhen4g4 = follow-politics) = pursue political career, join 政黨 (zheng4 dang3 = political-party). In Chinese, 政客 (zheng4 ke4 = political-activist) implies playing dirty politics, while 政治家 (zheng4 zhi4 jia1 = politics-rule-master = politician) has vision/ideals.

Protesters criticize 政權 (zheng4 quan2 = rule-power/authority = regime), shout: “苛政猛於虎!” (he1 zhen4g4 meng3 yu1 hu3 = harsh-rule-fierce-than-tiger = “The rulers/laws are oppressive, tyrannical!”), demand 還政於民 (huan2 zhen4g4 yu1 min2 = return-rulership-to-the-people).

by Diana Yue