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.

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This week: Words about People's Congress

班 (ban1)
Cantonese pronunciation: baan3
Meanings: class, level, team, term

班 (ban1 zu3 = troupe)-ord = team’s boss)

Employees 上班 (shang4 ban1 = mount-shift = go to work), 下班 (xia4 ban1 = dismount-work = get off work), avoid 夜班 (ye4 ban1 = night-shifts). Traveler takes 早班 (zao3 ban1 che1 = early-scheduled-car = early bus/train), catches 班机 (ban1 jji1 = fixed-time-machine/air-plane = scheduled flight).

New 領導班子 (ling3 dao3 ban1 zi0 = lead-guide-team-diminutive = team of leaders) has strong 班底 (ban1 di3 = team-base/backing), dismisses those who 不夠班 (bu4 gou4 ban1 = aren’t-adequately-qualified).

by Diana Yue