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 younger generation

Putonghua pronunciation: shao 3, shao 4
Cantonese pronunciation: siu 2, siu 3
Meanings: small, young

Quantitatively, 少 (shao3) means few/short of. Age-wise, 少 (shao4) means young/junior: 少年時代 (shao4 nian2 shi2 dai4 = young-years/age-time-generation = teenage), 少女 (shao4 nu3 = teenage-girls), 老夫少妻 (lao3 fu1 shao4 qii1 = old-husband-young-wife). 少爺 (shao4 ye2 = young-sire = young master)’s wife is 少奶奶 (shao4 nai3 nai0 = young-madam-madam = young mistress).

少年人 (shao4 nian2 ren2 = teenage-persons) are usually 少不更事 (shao4 bu4 geng1 shi4 = young-not-experience-things = young hence unexposed/inexperienced), rarely 年少老成 (nian2 shao4 lao3 cheng2 = year/age-young-old-ripe = young but mature-mannered, mature-minded).

少壯派 (shao4 zhuang4 pai4 = young-strong-faction = rising second generation) challenges 當權派 (dang1 quan2 pai4 = manage-power-faction = power-wielders) in power struggle.

by Diana Yue