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 Ebola

非

Putonghua pronunciation: fei1
Cantonese pronunciation: fei1
Meaning: no, not, un-, transliteration of “Africa”

非 = 不 (bu4, not): 非常 (fei1 chang2 = not-usual = very/extraordinary), 非法 (fei1 fa3 = il-legal), 是非 (shi4 fei1 = correct/right-incorrect/wrong). 非攻 (fei1 gong1 = Condemnation of Offensive War) is ancient Chinese anti-war treatise.

非洲洲 (A4 Fei1 Li4 Jia1 zhou1 = “Africa”-transliterated-continent) = 非洲 (Fei1 zhou1 = African continent). African slaves led 非人生活 (fei1 ren2 sheng1 huo2 = in-human-born-live = inhuman/oppressed lives). China promotes 亚非拉 (Ya4 Fei1 La1 = Asia-Africa-Latin-America) friendship.

西非 (Xi2 Fi1 = Western Africa) is in 非常時期 (fei1 chang2 shi2 qi1 = not-ordinary-time-period = extremely crucial/difficult times), with 埃博拉出血熱 (ai1 bo2 la1 chu1 xue3 ri4 = “Ebola”-transliterated-emit-blood-infection = Ebola virus disease) raging.

by Diana Yue