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

叛
Putonghua pronunciation: pan 4
Cantonese pronunciation: boon 6
Meanings: rebel

叛 contains/means 反 (fan3 = overturn/revolt). 叛逆 (pan4 ni4 = rebel-counter/disobey) = rebellious. 叛徒 (pan4 tu2 = rebel-subject = rebels) 策反 (ce4 fan3 = plan-revolt), lead 叛军 (pan4 jun1 = rebel-army), instigate 叛變 (pan4 bian4 = rebel-change = 叛亂 pan4 luan4 = rebel/turmoil = rebellion). 叛國罪 (pan4 guo2 zui4 = rebel-against-state-sin/crime) = treason, 叛黨 (pan4 dang3 = rebel-party/group/associates) = traitors.

Youngsters show 反叛性 (fan3 pan4 xing4 = reverse-rebel-nature = rebelliousness by 駭嘴 (bo2 zui3 = counter-mouth = talking back), 逃學 (tao2 xue2 = escape-school = playing truant), 離家出走 (li2 jia1 chu1 zou3 = leave-home-out-run = abandoning home).

Rebellious thinkers/activists 離經叛道 (li2 jing1 pan4 dao4 = abandon-classics/bible-rebel-against-way/dogma = embrace/preach controversial doctrines).

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