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 Los Angeles

Putonghua pronunciation: yi4
Cantonese pronunciation: yui6
Meanings: descendant, offspring

裔 (radical 衣 y1, clothes) means 後裔 (hou4 yi4 = posterity’s-descendants). Chinese want 子裔 (zi3 yi4 = sons-descendants) to 延續香燈 (yan2 xü2 xiang1 deng1 = prolong-continue-joss-sticks-lamp = continue ancestral worship and family line).

洛杉磯 (luo4 san1 jil1 = “Los Angeles”-transliterated)’s population is 多族裔 (duo1 zu2 yi4 = multi-race-descendent = multi-ethnic): whites, blacks, 西語系 (xi1 yü3 xi4 = “S”panish-transliterated-language-line = Hispanics), 亞裔 (ya3 yi4 = “A”sian-transliterated-descendants = Asians).

華裔 (hua2 yi4 = Chinese-descendants) are from 台灣 (tai2 wan1 = Taiwan), 香港 (xiang1 gang3 = Hong Kong), 大陸 (da4 lu4 = big-land = Mainland China). America’s aborigines — 印第安裔 (yin4 di4 an1 yi4 = “Indian”-transliterated-descendants = native Indians) — are pitiably out-numbered.

by Diana Yue