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

繼
Putonghua pronunciation: ji 4
Cantonese pronunciation: gai 3
Meanings: continue, succeed, successive

In character 繼, radical 糸 (丝 si1, silk/thread) suggests succession/continuation. Widower takes 繼室 (ji4 shi1 = succeed-room = next wife after deceased wife). 繼父繼母 (ji4 fu4 ji4 mu3 = succeed-father-succeed-mother) = step-parents. “繼續!” (ji4 xu2 = succeed-link/extend = continue) means “Go/carry on!” 後勁不繼 (hou4 jing4 bu4 ji4 = final-strength-not/unable-continue) describes runners/competitors dropping behind in the final lap.

遺囑 (yi2 zhu3 = deceased/leave-reminding-words = deceased will) names 繼承人 (ji4 cheng2 ren2 = succeed-receive-person = heir) to 繼承 (ji4 cheng2 = succeed-receive = inherit) deceased’s estate. Crown prince 繼位 (ji4 wei4 = succeed-seat = succeeds the throne). Great rulers/thinkers 繼往開來 (ji4 wang3 kai1 lai2 = inherit-past-open/develop-coming = expand predecessors’ territories/intellectual premises).

by Diana Yue