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 talents

愚

Putonghua pronunciation: yu 2
Cantonese pronunciation: yue 4
Meanings: stupid, foolish, deceive

愚 = 愚笨 (yu ben 24 = stupid-clumsy/slow-witted), 愚昧 (yu mei 24 = stupid-unenlightened/ignorant), 愚弄 (yu nong 24 = fool-handle) = deceiving/tricking someone. 愚民政策 (yu min zheng ce 2244 = fool/deceive-people-administration-plan) = government policies that treat the people like fools.


Confucius said 上智下愚 (shang zhi xia yu 4442 = top-wise-bottom-stupid = gap between talented and stupid people) is irreversible. Mao Zedong, however, cited the fable “愚公移山” (yu gong yi shan 2424 = Foolish-Old-Man-moved-the-mountains) to explain how perseverance can perpetuate China’s socialist revolution.

by Diana Yue