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

才
Putonghua pronunciation: cai 2
Cantonese pronunciation: choi 4
Meanings: talent, talented person

Adverb 才 means “only then did...”. Noun 才 = 才能 (cai neng 22 = talent-ability). Mozart was a 天才 (tian cai 12 = heaven-talent = genius). Actors/actresses need 才華 (cai hua 22 = talent/flair). Stand-up comedians need 急才 (ji cai 22 = urgent-talent = quick wits). 庸才 (yong cai 12 = ordinary-talent) = mediocre worker. “蠢才!” (chun cai 32 = stupid-talent) means "Fool!"

Good rulers/bosses 懐才 (lian cai 22 = pity/care-for-talents = like/appreciate talented people), 貯才 (zhu cai 42 = hoard-talent = keep talent pools). Bad/mean leaders 忌才 (ji cai 42 = fear/dislike-talent).

Romance stories praise 才子佳人 (cai zi jia ren 2312 = talent-son/man-fine-person = talented scholar and beautiful woman = a fine/compatible/enviable pair).