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 narcissism

自 (zi 4)
Cantonese pronunciation: ji 6
Meanings: self, independent

自己 (zi4 ji3 = self-myself) = oneself. 自由 (zi4 you2 = self-let-free) = freedom. Literature expresses individual’s 自我 (zi4 wo3 = self-I = ego). 自私 (zi4 si1 = self-private) = selfish. 自大 (zi4 da4 = self-big = conceited) people lack 自知之明 (zi4 zhi1 zhi1 ming2 = self-know-’s-clarity = understanding of own calibre).


不知自愛 (bu2 zhi1 zhi1 ai4 = no-know-self-love) describes people throwing away their own lives frivolously. 自戀狂 (zi4 lian3 kuang2 = self-loving-mania) = narcissism.

by Diana Yue