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 practice

綃 Putonghua pronunciation: lian4
Cantonese pronunciation: lin6
Meanings: practice, rehearse


Aspiring writer 練筆 (lian4 bi3 = practice-pen = tries out writing skills). Martial-artists 練功 (lian4 gong1 = practice-kung-fu). Generals 練兵 (lian4 bing1 = train-troops/armies).

CEOs are 老練 (lao3 lian4 = old-practice = experienced/well-practiced), 幹練 (gan4 lian4 = do-practice = smart/tough/capable). PR veterans 人情練達 (ren2 qing1 lian4 da2 = people-feelings/rationale-experienced-through = are worldly-wise/suave, can handle people-affairs/situations wisely/smoothly).

by Diana Yue