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 making selections

慎
Putonghua pronunciation: shen4
Cantonese pronunciation: san6
Meaning: careful, prudent, cautious

慎 (radical † = 心 shen1, heart + 真 zhen1, true/real) = 慎重 (shen4 zhong4 = careful/prudent-serious). Decision-makers are 睿慎 (shen3 shen4 = wary/examine-prudent = warily cautious). Pedestrian neglects “慎防碎石” (shen4 fang2 sui4 shi2 = careful-guard-broken-stone = “Beware of gravel”) sign, 不慎跌倒 (bu4 shen4 die1 dao3 = not-careful-fall-down = carelessly trips over).

Scientist 思想慎密 (si1 xiang3 shen4 mi4 = thought-idea-cautious-tight = is well-organized/meticulous in thinking). Scary person 謹慎詭微 (jin3 xiao3 shen4 wei1 = prudent-small-cautious-tiny = checks himself on minor issues/details).

Sage advocates 慎言 (shen4 yan2 = prudent-language/speech), 慎行 (shen4 xing2 = prudent-behavior/actions), warns law-breakers: “慎之, 慎之!” (shen4 zhi4! shen4 zhi4! = Be careful, think twice!

by Diana Yue