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.

**Putonghua pronunciation:** fang4
**Cantonese pronunciation:** fong3
**Meanings:** release, free, liberate


Nuclear reactors' 放射性 (fang4 she4 xing4 = release-shoot-nature = radioactive) emissions make inhabitants 放棄 (fang4 qi4 = give-up-abandon) homes.

In Shelley’s drama Prometheus Unbound, Zeus was 放逐 (fang4 zhu2 = sent-off-chased-away = banished), Prometheus was 釋放 (shii4 fang4 = untied-released). Lincoln 解放黑奴 (jie3 fang4 hei1 nu2 = untied-released-black-slaves = freed slaves). China’s 人民解放軍 (ren2 min2 jie3 fang4 jun1 = person-people-untie-release-army) = People’s Liberation Army = PLA.

by Diana Yue