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 faith

任
Putonghua pronunciation: ren4
Cantonese pronunciation: yam6
Meaning: believe, faith, conviction, faithful, reliable, honest, trust, trustworthy, confident

任 (人 ren2, person + 義 ren2, load carried on shoulder-pole) means 責任 (ze2 ren4 = responsibility/duty-burden). Employer 信任 (xin4 ren4 = trust-entrust-with-duty = trusts) employee, gives him 任命 (ren4 ming4 = appointment-order) with three years’ 任期 (ren4 qi1 = appointment-period).

Schoolmaster 任職 (ren4 zhi2 = holding-post) at posh school has 任務 (ren4 wu4 = assigned-duty) to tame 任性 (ren4 xing4 = trusted/freed/loosened-nature = spoilt) kids because parents 任由 (ren4 you2 = freely-let) kids play truant.

State leaders should not 任意胡為 (ren4 yi4 hu2 wei2 = free-intent-barbarically-do-things = act rashly/selfishly) because 任重而道遠 (ren4 zhong4 er2 dao4 yuan3 = mission-heavy-and-way-far = they are entrusted with meaningful but difficult and long-term missions).

by Diana Yue