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 corruption

廉
Putonghua pronunciation: lian2
Cantonese pronunciation: lim4
Meanings: low-priced, frugal, un-corrupt

廉 = 低廉 (di1 lian2 = low-cheap-price): 廉價勞力 (lian2 jia4 lao2 li4 = low-priced-labor-strength = cheap labor). Goods made in China are 優廉物美 (jia4 lian2 wu4 mei3 = price-cheap-thing-beautiful = cheap and good-quality).

Confucianism advocated 四維 (si4 wei2 = four-cord/key/standard): 禮 (li3, rites/propiety), 義 (yi4, righteousness), 廉 (lian2, frugal/un-corrupt practice), 耻 (chi3, notion of shame). 清廉 (qing1 lian2 = clear/pure-frugal = 廉潔 lian2 jie2, frugal-clean = un-corrupt) officials reject extravagance/bribes.

HK Government 高薪養廉 (gao1 xin1 yang3 lian2 = high-salary-support-frugal = pay public servants well to keep them un-corrupt), empowers 廉政公署 (lian2 zheng4 gong1 shu3 = un-corrupt-rule/administration-public-bureau = Independent Commission Against Corruption = ICAC) to investigate 貪污 (tan1 wu1 = greed-dirt = corruption).

by Diana Yue