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 centenary celebrations

Putonghua pronunciation: ren2
Cantonese pronunciation: yan4
Meanings: person, man, humanity

Pictogram 人 shows human trunk and two legs: 人民 (ren2 min2 = people~population), 人類 (ren2 lei4 = man~kind), 人生 (ren2 sheng1 = human~life = life).

做人難 (zuo4 ren2 nan2 = doing/being~person~difficult) = Living your life among others is difficult/challenging. 惡人 (e4 ren2 = fierce/vicious~people), 壞人 (huai4 ren2 = bad~people) exploit 蠱人 (chun3 ren2 = stupid~people), 好人 (hao3 ren2 = good~people), 偉人 (wei3 ren2 = great~people), 聖人 (sheng4 ren2 = saintly~people) are rare.

Educationists say 十年樹木, 百年樹人 (shi2 nian2 shu4 mu4, bai3 nian2 shu4 ren2 = ten~years~erect~tree, hundred~years~erect~people = growing trees takes a decade, nurturing people takes a century), i.e. fostering人才 (ren2 cai2 = human~talent = talented/useful people) requires time/dedication.

by Diana Yue