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 filial piety

Putonghua pronunciation: jìng4
Cantonese pronunciation: ging3
Meanings: respect, revere, honor, treat politely, present politely


Respectful gestures include 敬酒 (jìng4 jiǔ3 = respectfully-present-wine, make wine toast), 敬禮 (jìng4 lǐ3 = respectful-ceremony/gesture = salute), 鞠躬 (jū1 gōng1 = bow-body = make bow), 叩頭 (kòu4 tóu2 = tap-head = kowtow). 默哀致敬 (mó4 ài1 zhì4 jìng4 = silent-grief-present~ respect) describes mourners observing silence.

Diligent workers 敬業 (jìng4 yè4 = respect-profession = take work seriously). Greeting new acquaintances, we say “失敬!” (shī1 jìng4 = lose-respect = Oops! Haven’t paid respects to you yet!)

by Diana Yue