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 self-improvement

Putonghua pronunciation: yan2
Cantonese pronunciation: yim4
Meaning: strict, stern, un-relaxed, harsh, serious

嚴 = stern/serious: 嚴重 (yan2 zhong4 = serious-weighty/big) problem, 嚴密 (yan2 mi4 = strict-tight) organization, 嚴格 (yan2 ge2 = strict-rigorous) training, 嚴厲 (yan2 li4 = harsh-fierce) condemnation, 嚴冬 (yan2 dong1 = harsh-winter), 嚴刑 (yan2 xing2 = strict/harsh-penalties), 嚴父 (yan2 fu4 = stern-father).

Confucianism advocates 嚴謹 (yan2 jin3 = serious-cautious/meticulous) ethics: 格物 (ge2 wu4 = analyse-things), 致知 (zhi4 zhi1 = attain-knowledge), 試意 (cheng2 yi4 = maintain-honest-intent), 正心 (zheng4 xin1 = keep-unbiased-mind), 修身 (xiu1 shen1 = cultivate-personal-morals), 齊家 (qi2 jia1 = maintain-order/harmony-in-family), 治國 (zhi4 guo2 = govern-country), 平天下 (ping2 tian1 xia4 = keep-peace-in-all-land-under-heaven).

嚴肅 (yan2 su4 = serious-principled) person 律己以嚴 (lǔ4 ji3 yi3 yan2 = regulates-him/herself-with-strictness = keeps strict self-discipline).

by Diana Yue