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 making friends

慎
Putonghua pronunciation: shen4
Cantonese pronunciation: san6
Meanings: cautious, prudent

Character 慎 = ⬇️ (心 xin1, heart) + 真 (zhen1, true/honest). 慎重 (shen4 zhong4 = cautious-heavy/serious) = weigh situation carefully. Well-bred person 慎言 (shen4 yan2 = cautious-words = minds/checks his speech), 慎行 (shen4 xing2 = cautious-action, = minds/checks his behavior).

謹慎 (jin3 shen2 = obedient/prim-cautious) = prudent. Cautious/timid person 謹小慎微 (jin3 xiao3 shen4 wei1 = prudent-small-cautious-tiny = takes even small things cautiously), never 亂來 (luan4 lai2 = confuse-come = do things blindly/rashly).

一個不慎 (yi1 ge4 bu4 shen4 = one-unit-no-cautious = just one careless mistake), you may 誤交損友 (wu4 jiao1 sun3 you3 = mistake-make-harmful-friend = get mixed up with bad people).

“慎之!” (shen4 zhi1 = cautious-it) = “Be careful, think it through!”

by Diana Yue