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 donations

Putonghua pronunciation: yi4
Cantonese pronunciation: yi6
Meanings: correct, righteous, just, integrity, helping, free-of-charge, charitable

義 (radical 羊 yang2, sheep/goat) means 道義 (dao4 yi4 = correct-path-righteousness = righteous principles), 正義 (zheng4 yi4 = correct-righteous), 公義 (gong1 yi4 = public-righteousness = justice). 義士 (yi4 shi4 = righteous-scholar/soldier/men) fight 不義 (bu4 yi4 = not-just = injustices).

義 implies free/unconditional help: 義務 (yi4 wu4 = correct/unconditional-duty = duty/obligation), 義父 (yi4 fu4 = foster-father), 義子 (yi4 zi3 = foster-son), 義肢 (yi4 zhi1 = artificial-limb), 義貢 (yi4 mai4 = charity-sale). Buddies 義助 (yi4 zhu4 = unconditionally-help) friends, showing 義氣 (yi4 qi4 = comaderie/brotherhood-spirit).

Donor funds 義學 (yi4 xue2 = charity-school), 義莊 (yi4 zhuang1 = charity-lodge keeping deceased migrants’ bodies/bones/coffins), calls it 義不容辭 (yi4 bu4 rong2 ci2 = righteous/duty-no-allow-refuse = his compelling duty).

by Diana Yue