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

忠
Putonghua pronunciation: zhong1
Cantonese pronunciation: jung1
Meanings: faithful, loyal, devoted

忠 (zhong1, center/middle + 心 xin1, heart) shows unbiased heart, means firm loyalty/devotion: 忠於 (zhong1 yü1 = loyal-to) friend/belief/duty. 盡忠職守 (jin4 zhong1 zhi1 shou3 = complete/faithful-post-guard = absolutely devoted to work). Writer has 忠實讀者 (zhong1 shi2 du2 zhe3 = loyal-true-read-person = devoted readers). 忠厚 (zhong1 you4 = loyal-thick = kind/considerate) person won誑 lie/hurt others.

忠言逆耳 (zhong1 yan2 ni4 er3 = honest-words-against-ear) describes ear-grating criticism/advice. Wife divorces 不忠 (bu4 zhong1 = no-loyal = unfaithful) husband.

Confucianism praises 忠臣 (zhong1 chen2 = loyal/patriotic ministers/subjests). Soldiers killed in war are buried in 忠烈祠 (zhong1 lie4 ci2 = loyal-brave-sacrifice-shrine = shrine for national martyrs). 愚忠 (yü2 zhong1 = foolish-loyalty) means stubborn devotion to undeserving leader.

by Diana Yue