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 Chinese national anthem

危
Putonghua pronunciation: we1
Cantonese pronunciation: ngai4
Meanings: high, dangerous, menacing, endanger, danger, dying

Pictogram 危 shows person kneeling on dangerous cliff, hence 危害 (we1 hai4 = endanger-harm), 危難 (we1 nan4 = danger-suffering/calamity), 危樓 (we1 lou2 = unsafe/toppling-building), 病危 (bing4 we1 = ill-dangerous/dying).

Doomsday preacher 危言聳聽 (we1 yan2 song3 ting4 = menacing-words-stir-listen = spread alarmist message). Sage warns: 居安思危 (jü1 an1 si1 we1 = living-in-safety-think-danger): Although enjoying comfort/safety, think/worry about possible 危機 (we1 jii1 = danger-chance = crisis).

Chinese 國歌 (guo2 ge1 = state-song = national anthem), written in WWII, describes invaded nation at 最危險的時候 (zui4 we1 xian3 de0 shi2 hou4 = most-dangerous-time), i.e., 危急存亡之秋 (we1 ji2 cün2 wang2 zhi1 qiu1 = dangerous-urgent-survive-perish-‘s-autumn = dangerous time/juncture of either surviving or perishing).

by Diana Yue