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 graduation

Putonghua pronunciation: ye4
Cantonese pronunciation: yip6
Meanings: doing, work, cause, employment, profession, achievement, estate

業 means work/engagement/profession: 學業 (xue2 ye4 = study-work = course of study), 職業 (zhi2 ye4 = post-profession = job), 事業 (shi4 ye4 = affairs-work = career). 業餘 (ye4 yu2 = profession-remain/outside) = amateur.

Graduates 就業 (jiu4 ye4 = join-work = find employment). Those who have 事業心 (shi4 ye4 xin1 = affairs-enterprise-heart = are career-minded) 創業 (chuang4 ye4 = create-achievement = establish careers/enterprises) in 農業 (nong2 ye4 = farming-proessions = agriculture), 工業 (gong1 ye4 = work/engineer-proessions = industries), acquire 家業 (jia1 ye4 = family-estates/fortunes).

In Buddhism, 業 means 因果報應 (yin1 guo3 bao4 ying4 = cause-result-reward-echo = inevitability of cause and effect = karma): 善業 (shan4 ye4 = good-works), 惡業 (er4 ye4 = evil-works).

by Diana Yue