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 leaders

主
Putonghua pronunciation: zhu3
Cantonese pronunciation: chu1
Meaning: master, host, independent, main, sovereign, active, commanding

主 (dot on 王 wang2, king) means 主要 (zhu3 yao4 = main-important): 君主 (jün1 zhu3 = monarch-sovereign), 主人 (zhu3 ren2 = master-person = lord/master/host), 主席 (zhu3 xi2 = principal-chair = chairman), 主管 (zhu3 guan3 = principal-in-charge), 物主 (wu4 zhu3 = thing’s-owner), 主食 (zhu3 shi2 = main-eat/food = staple).

Christians worship 天主 (tian1 zhu3 = heavenly-lord = God), 主耶稣 (zhu3 ye1 su1 = lord-“Je-su”-transliterated = Lord Jesus). Thinker coins 主義 (zhu3 yi4 = principal-meaning = school of thought/“ism”).

Intelligent person has 主意 (zhu3 yi4 = self-conceived-idea), 主動 (zhu3 dong4 = self-move/act = positively/voluntarily) raises 主張 (zhu3 zhang1 = independent-opinion). Strong country 主宰 (zhu3 zai3 = controls-governs/dictates) world affairs, becomes 盟主 (meng2 zhu3 = allies’ leader).

by Diana Yue