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

奴
Putonghua pronunciation: nu2
Cantonese pronunciation: no4
Meanings: high, dangerous, menacing, endanger, danger, dying

奴 shows 女 (nü3, woman) + 又 (= 手 shou3, hand/snatched). Slave-masters 奴役 (nu2 yi4 = slave-labor = enslave/oppress) 家奴 (jia1 nu2 = domestic-slaves), 農奴 (nong2 nu2 = farm-slaves/ serfs), 黑奴 (hei1 nu2 = black-slaves). In WWII Japanese invaders made Chinese/Korean women 性奴 (xing4 nu2 = sex-slaves)

洋奴 (yang2 nu2 = across-ocean/foreigner't-slave = Chinese who kow-tow to westerners) demonstrate 奴性 (nu2 xing4 = slavish/self-debasing-nature). 房奴 (fang2 nu2 = house-slave), 車奴 (che1 nu2 = car-slave) mean low-income worker slaving/toiling away to buy house/car.

Chinese national anthem rallies 不願做奴隸的人們 (bu4 yuan4 zuo4 nu2 li4 de0 ren2 men2 = no-willing-to-be-slaves~’s-people = those who don’t want to be slaves) to 反抗 (fan3 kang4 = rebel-against-resist) oppression.

by Diana Yue