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

Putonghua pronunciation: shuai4
Cantonese pronunciation: sui3
Meaning: admiral, chief, leader, commander, handsome

帥 (radical巾 jin1, kerchief) = 主帥 (zhu3 shuai4 = chief/highest-commander). Emperor appoints hero to 掌帥印 (zhang3 shuai4 yin4 = hold highest commander’s seal), 帥兵 (shuai4 bing1 = command-soldiers/military forces). In Chinese chess, chess-pieces 帥 (shuai4, admiral), 將 (jiang4, general) are commanders-in-chief of the two sides, equivalent to king in international chess. CEO統帥 (tong3 shuai4 = overall-command = heads) company. Communist leaders debate whether 經濟掛帥 (jing1 j14 gua4 shuai4 = manage-irrigate/aid-elevate-commander = give economic considerations priority) or 政治掛帥 (zheng4 zhi4 gua4 shuai4 = administer-rule-elevate-commander = give political considerations priority).

元帥 (yuan2 shuai4 = principal-commander = admiral) is highest rank in Chinese army. However, 帥哥 (shuai4 ge1 = commander-big-brother) flirtatiously means “handsome guy”.

by Diana Yue