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 Chief Executive Election

網 (radical 纔 mi4, string/thread) originally means fishing net’s main rope on which hang net’s 目 (mu4, eyes), hence 網舉目張 (gang1 jù3 mu4 zhang1 = main-rope-raised-eyes-opened) describes plan’s correct steering: with main principle upheld, smaller parts can’t go wrong.

網 now means essential part/outline. Writer sketches book’s 大網 (da4 gang1 = big/main~outline). CEO explains project’s 網領 (gang1 ling3 = outline~lead = leading principles). 夫網不振 (fu1 gang1 bu4 zhen4 = husband’s~principles~not~strengthened) describes weak, hen-pecked husband.

Chief Executive election candidates Henry Tang (nicknamed 豬 zhu1, pig) and C. Y. Leung (nicknamed 狼 lang2, wolf) debated on their 政網 (zheng4 gang1 = political-principles = political programs). Smearing and accusations 無限上網 (wu2 xian4 shang4 gang1 = no-limit-raise-principle = had no ceiling).

by Diana Yue