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 relatives

辈 Putonghua pronunciation: bei4
Cantonese pronunciation: booi3
Meaning: generation, kind of people

辈 (radical 車 che1, chariot/car/cart) means generation/kind/group: 我這輩子 (wo3 zhe4 yi1 bei4 z10 = I/me-this-one-generation-diminutive = my entire life), 同輩 (tong2 bei4 = same-generation/seniority), 朋輩 (peng2 bei4 = friends-peers).

Chinese society observes 輩份 (bei4 fen4 = generation-part = generation hierarchy in clan/circles) strictly. 後輩 (hou4 bei4 = later/younger-generations e.g. nephew/son) honour/obey 先輩 (xian1 bei4 = early-generations = ancestors), 長輩 (zhang3 bei4 = older-generations e.g. grandfather/uncle). Younger practitioners call themselves “晚輩” (wan3 bei4 = evening/later-generation = juniors), respectfully call seniors “前輩” (qian2 bei4 = previous-generation = seniors).

鼠輩 (shu3 bei4 = mouse/rat-generation) = despicable people.

英雄輩出 (ying1 xiong2 bei4 chu1 = fine-male-generation-emerge) describes rise of numerous heroes/leaders in same epoch.

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