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:

1. 1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged
2. 2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high
3. 3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high
4. 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

才
Putonghua pronunciation: cai2
Cantonese pronunciation: choi4
Meaning: talent, ability, ingenuity, talented person

才 (radical 手 shou3, hand) means talent: 詩才 (shi1 cai2 = poetic-talent), 畫才 (hua4 cai2 = painting-talent). Napoleon was 將才 (jiang4 cai2 = general-talent = talented military leader). Speaker demonstrates 辯才 (bian4 cai2 = debate-talent = oracular flaire), 才智 (cai2 zhi4 = talent-clever-wit).

Actress 才貌雙全 (cai2 mao4 shuang1 qian2 = talent-looks-both-perfect = has both beauty and talent). Manager uses 才幹 (cai2 gan4 = ingenuity-ability) to promote her 才華 (cai3 hua3 = talent-glour = fine/dazzling talent).

庸才 (yong1 cai2 = ordinary-talent = mediocre people) envy 才子 (cai2 zi3 = talented-men = men boasting literary talent/flaire), but none can rival 李白 (Li3 Bai2, Tang Dynasty poet)'s 天才 (tian1 cai2 = heavenly-talent = genius).

by Diana Yue