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 dress codes

Putonghua pronunciation: li3
Cantonese pronunciation: lai5
Meaning: ceremonies, rites, propriety, decorum, manners

禮 (radical 𠘨 = shi4, god/manifest) = 禮教 (li3 jiao4 = rites/properity-teaching, Confucianism's behavioral code): 禮儀 (li3 yi2 = rites/ceremonies), 禮貌 (li3 mao4 = decorum/politeness-manners), 禮物 (li3 wu4 = polite-thing = gift). 禮拜 (li3 bai4 = treat-respectfully-worship/idolize) means worship or Christian/western calendar's seven-day week.

Bride wearing 娶紗 (hun1 sha1 = wedding/bridal-veil) and groom wearing 燕尾服 (yan4 wei3 fu2 = swallow's-tail-dress = tails/tuxedo) hold 婚禮 (hun1 li3 = marriage/wedding-ceremony) in 禮堂 (li3 tang2 = ceremoinial-hall). Widow wears 喪服 (sang1 fu2 = mourning-dress) at husband's 葬禮 (zang4 li3 = bury/inter-ceremony = burial/funeral).

有禮 (you3 li3 = has-manners) = polite. Neglecting party's dress-code is 無禮 (wu2 li3 = lacking-manners), 矢禮 (shi1 li3 = lose-manners = impolite/rude/embarrassing).

by Diana Yue