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

服
Putonghua pronunciation: fu2
Cantonese pronunciation: fuk6
Meaning: defer, obey, adore, accept, submissive, serve

服 (radical 月 =肉 rou4, flesh) means serve/convinced/deferent. Sheep are 馴服 (xün4 fu2 = tame-obedient). Maid 服侍 (fu2 shì4 = serves-waits-on) mistress. 服務員 (fu2 wù4 yuán2 = serve-chores-member) = waiter/attendant.

Soldier 服從 (fu2 cong2 = obeys-follows) orders, 佩服 (pèi4 fu2 = respects/adores) general. Loser 服輸 (fu2 shū1 = accept-defeat = admits he is inferior/defeated). Decision 難以服眾 (nán2 yì3 fu2 zòng4 = difficult-to-convince-majority = cannot win overall popularity/acceptance) because some people 不服氣 (bu4 fu2 qì4 = no-pacify-gas = aren’t persuaded/convinced appeased).

Benevolent ruler 以德服人 (yì3 dé2 fu2 rén2 = with-virtue-inspire/awe-people = wins people’s respect/admiration with his kind heart/deeds), 令人折服 (lìng4 fén2 zhe2 fu2 = make-people-bend-respect/admire = makes others bend over in respect/awe).

by Diana Yue