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 adultery

Putonghua pronunciation: zong4
Cantonese pronunciation: jung3
Meanings: send, deliver, loosen, free, over-indulge

縱 (radical 系 = 絲 xi1, thread/silk) means loosen/free. 縱身一跳 (zong4 shen1 yi1 tiao4 = free-body-one-leap) describes person’s leaping/plunging action. Rider 縱馬奔馳 (zong4 ma3 ben1 chi2 = lets-horse-run-gallop = gives horse free rein). 縱火 (zong4 huo3 = free-fire) = arson. Adverb 縱然 (zong4 ran2 = free-yes) means “although/ despite”.

Parents 縱容 (zong4 rong2 = free-allow = give too much freedom to) kid. Kid is 縱壞 (free-bad = spoilt).


by Diana Yue