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 National Day

念
Putonghua pronunciation: nian4
Cantonese pronunciation: nim6
Meaning: idea, remember, memorize, memory, commemorate, recite

念 (radical 心 xin1, heart) means 念頭 (nian4 tou2 = idea-head = idea/thought). Adults 懷念 (huai2 nian4 = embrace-thoughts/memories-of) childhood. 一念之差 (yi1 nian4 zhi1 cha1 = one-idea-s-difference/fault = one wrong decision/mis-step) can cause many mistakes. 念經 (nian4 jing1 = reciting scriptures/sutras) dispels 俗念 (su2 nian4 = vulgar-thoughts).

Miser 念念不忘 (nian4 nian4 bu4 wang2 = thought-thought-no-forget = cannot put aside) riches. Sage advises: Substitute 貪念 (tan1 nian4 = greedy-thoughts), 惡念 (er4 nian4 = malicious-thoughts) with 愛念 (ai4 nian4 = loving/thoughts).

Survivors 紀念 (ji4 nian4 = mark-remember = commemorate) war heroes. 人民英雄紀念碑 (ren2 min2 ying1 xiong12 jii4 nian4 bei1 = person-people-heroic-brave-mark-remember-stele = Monument to the People’s Heroes) is in Beijing’s Tian-an-men Square.

by Diana Yue