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 heroes

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

才 (radical 扌 = 手 shou3, hand) means 才能 (cai2 neng2 = talent-ability), 才華 (cai2 hua2 = talent-flair), 天才 (tian1 cai2 = heavenly/natural-talent) = genius. TV host needs 才智 (cai2 zhi4 = talents-intelligence/talent) = eloquence.

Boss 求才若渴 (qiu2 cai2 ruo4 ke3 = seek-talents-resemble-thirsty = hungers/thirsts for talents), dislikes 蠢才 (chun3 cai2 = stupid-persons/fools), sacks 奴才 (nu2 cai2 = slavish/servile-persons = lackeys/minions), promotes 人才 (ren2 cai2 = person-talent = outstanding talents), praises CEO’s 幹才 (gan4 cai2 = work/executive-abilities/expertise).

Society needs 大將之才 (da4 jiang4 zhi1 cai2 = great-general’s-talent = outstanding leaders), especially those who 才德兼備 (cai2 de2 jian4 bei4 = talents-morals-both-have = combine high morals with distinguished learning/talents).

by Diana Yue