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

Putonghua pronunciation: zhong1
Cantonese pronunciation: jung1

Meaning: truthful, devoted, dedicated, loyal, patriotic

忠 (zhong1, center + 心 xin1, heart) means 忠心 (zhong1 xin1 = devoted-heart/will): 忠實 (zhong1 shi2 = faithful-truthful) description, 忠誠 (zhong1 cheng2 = devoted-honest/sincere) comrade. 忠僕 (zhong4 pu2 = loyal-servant) 鑃忠職守 (jin4 zhong1 zhi1 shou3 = all-devoted-to-post-morals = performs all duties/missions).

不忠 (bu4 zhong1 = un-faithful) husband ignores friend's 忠厚 (zhong1 hou4 = honest-thick/considerate = honest/kind) advice. Often, 忠言逆耳 (zhong1 yan2 ni4 er3 = honest/frank-words/admonitions-grate-against-ear).

忠貞 (zhong1 zhen1 = loyal-chaste/faithful) subjects 忠於 (zhong1 yu1 = remain loyal-to) country. Confucianism praises 忠孝 (zhong1 xiao4 = loyalty-filial-piety), 忠義 (zhong1 yi4 = patriotism-integrity). But some 忠臣 (zhong1 chen2 = loyal-ministers/subjects) are just 愚忠 (yu2 zhong1 = foolishly-loyal to undeserving leader).

by Diana Yue