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 studying and exams

(italic, radical 言, yan2 = word/speech)

Putonghua pronunciation: du2
Cantonese pronunciation: duk6
Meanings: read, read aloud, study


Libraries welcome 讀者 (du2 zhe3 = read-person = readers), stage writers/poets’ 朗讀會 (lang3 du2 hui4 = aloud-read-meeting = recital sessions). Lawyer 宣讀 (xuan1 du2 = pronounce-read = reads out) deceased’s will.

讀博士 (du2 bo2 shi4 = read-study-broad-scholar = studying PhD programme) requires 苦讀 (ku3 du2 = bitter/hard-read = studying diligently), 讀萬卷書 (du2 wan4 juan4 shu1 = read-10,000-scroll/volume-books = reading extensively).

by Diana Yue