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 Bodhisattva Guanyin

送 (song1) 送 (song4 dao4 = deliver-arrive = has arrived). 送客 (song4 ke4 = send-off-guest) = see guest out/off. 送别 (song3 bie2 = send-depart) = bid farewell.

School-bus接送 (jie2 song4 = accept-send = takes) children to and from school. Oil-pipes输送 (shu1 song4 = send-out-deliver = transport) petroleum. 送瘟神 (song4 wen1 shen2 = send-off-epidemic-god) means exorcising/sending away epidemic demon or much-hated person.

送礼 (song4 li3 = deliver-rite/present) = offering gifts/bribes. Woman wishing to get pregnant with male-child worships 送子观音 (song4 zi3 guan1 yin1 = bring-son-Guanyin = Bodhisattva Guanyin, bestower of sons).

by Diana Yue