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 Genesis

世
Putonghua pronunciation: shi4
Cantonese pronunciation: sai3
Meanings: world, generation

世 has physical/temporal meaning: 世界 (shi4 jie4 = world-territory = world), 世代 (shi4 dai4 = world-generation = epochs/generations).


Buddhists scorn 塵世 (chen2 shi4 = dust-world = dirty/vulgar/transient world), believe Buddha’s teachings enfold 大千世界 (da4 qian1 shi4 jie4 = big-thousand-world-territory = thousand X thousand X thousand worlds = boundless universe).

by Diana Yue