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.

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This week: Words about Journey to the West

師
Putonghua pronunciation: shī
Cantonese pronunciation: si1
Meanings: teacher, master

In China’s 唐朝 (Tang2 chao2 = Tang-Dynasty, 618-907AD), Buddhist monk玄奘 (Xuan2 Zang1) travelled through Xinjiang to India for nineteen years, wrote travelogue《大唐西域記》(Da4 Tang2 Xi1 Yu4 Ji4 = Great-Tang-Western-Regions-Records), became 一代宗師 (yi1 dai4 zong1 shī1 = one-generation-leader-master = age’s great master) of Chinese Buddhism, translated many Sanskrit 佛經 (fo2 jing1 = Buddhist sutras/scriptures) into Chinese.

In novel《西遊記》(xī1 you2 ji4 = west-travel-record = Journey to the West) he is called 唐三藏 (Tang1 San3 Zang4 = Tang-Dynasty-three-sutra-collections = Tripitaka).

His three disciples 護師 (hu4 shī1 = protect-teacher) throughout the perilous journey, called him 師父 (shī1 fū4 = “teacher-father”), 恩師 (en1 shī1 = grace-teacher = “magnanimous teacher/mentor”).

by Diana Yue