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

財

Putonghua pronunciation: cai2
Cantonese pronunciation: choi4
Meanings: wealth, riches, money

財 has radical 贝 (bei4, seashell, ancient money). 財主 (cai2 zhu3 = wealthy-master = rich man) owns 財產 (cai2 can3 = wealth-and-assets). 財經雜誌 (cai2 jing1 za2 zhi4 = finance-economy-miscellaneous-records/stories = financial magazines) report 財團 (cai2 tuan2 = financial-groups’) movements.

發財 (fa1 cai2 = issue-wealth = getting rich) is everyone’s wish. On day of 觀音開庫 (guan1 yin1 kai1 ku4 = Guanyin-opens-vault/coffers), temple-goers pray for 財運 (cai2 yun4 = wealth-luck = blessing/luck with money), place request-notes for 觀音菩薩 (guan1 yin1 pu2 sa3 = Guanyin-Bodhisattva) to honour.

Gambler求財 (qiu2 cai2 = goes-after-money), wins then loses, sighs: “見財化水!” (jian4 cai2 hua4 shui3 = see-wealth-transform/melt-into-water = “Money in sight just vanished!”)

by Diana Yue