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 Journey to the West

經

Putonghua pronunciation: jing1
Cantonese pronunciation: ging1
Meanings: classic

經 means principle route/text. Acupuncturist pricks energy-spots in human body's 經絡 (jing1 luo4 = channels-meridians). 經典 (jing1 dian3 = authoritative-code) = classic/bible: 佛經 (fo2 jing1 = Buddhist-sutras/scriptures), 《聖經》 (sheng4 jing1 = Christianity's Holy-Bible), 《古蘭經》 (gu3 lan2 jing1 = Islam's Quran). 天經地義 (tian1 jing1 di4 yi4 = heaven-authority-earth-significance) = something indisputably rightful/deserving.

僧 (Tang2 seng1 = Tang-Dynasty-monk = Xuanzang/ Tripitaka) 上西天取經 (shang4 xi1 tian1 qu3 jing1 = mount-west-heaven-get-scripture = went to Western Heaven, i.e. India, to find Buddhist scriptures). Today, 取經 (qu3 jing1 = get-scripture) describes junior seeking knowledge/advice from senior/teacher.

Worshippers 嚇經 (nian4 jing1 = recite-scriptures). Preachers 講經 (jiang3 jing1 = talk/preach-scriptures). Bettors study 馬經 (ma3 jing1 = horse-classic = racing tips).

by Diana Yue