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 Solomon's wisdom

婦
Putonghua pronunciation: fu4
Cantonese pronunciation: foo5
Meanings: mature/married woman


夫婦 (fu1 fu4 = man/husband-woman/wife) = married couple. 夫唱婦隨 (fu1 chang4 fu4 sui2 = husband-sings-wife-follows) describes compatible/happy couple. Society praises 節婦 (jie2 fu4 = virtuous-women/widows), despises 淫婦 (yin2 fu4 = lascivious-women/whores).

Slogan 婦女能頂半邊天 (fu4 nü2 neng2 ding3 ban4 bian1 tian1 = woman-female-can-hold-up-half-side-sky = Women can shoulder half of society's burden/responsibilities) reflects essence of 婦解 (fu4 jie3 = woman-untie/liberate = women's lib).

by Diana Yue