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 the Tibetan people

佛 (fo2)

Putonghua pronunciation: fo2
Cantonese pronunciation: fat6
Meaning: Buddha, Buddhist, Buddhism

佛 (fo2) is 佛陀 (fo2 tuo2 = Sanskrit “Buddha”-transliterated) abbreviated, means 觉者 (jue2 zhe3 = awakened/enlightened-one). 佛祖 (fo2 zu3 = Buddha-ancestor = the first Buddha i.e. Sakyamuni, 5th century BC) founded 佛教 (fo2 jiao4 = Buddha-religion = Buddhism).

Tibetan voodoo-ism苯教 (ben3 jiao4 = “Bon”-transliterated-religion = Bon) merged with China’s 大乘佛教 (da4 cheng2 fo2 jiao4 = big-cart-Buddha-religion = Mahayana Buddhism), formed 藏傳佛教 (Zang4 chuan2 fo2 jiao4 = Tibet-inherit/transmit-Buddha-religion = Tibetan Buddhism, since 7th century AD).

喇嘛 (la1 ma2 = “Lamas”-transliterated i.e. Tibetan Buddhist monks) teach 佛經 (fo2 jing1 = Buddhist scriptures/sutras/canon) to 佛教徒 (fo2 jiao4 tu2 = Buddhist-followers/practitioners).

by Diana Yue