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 fame and notoriety

Putonghua pronunciation: song4
Cantonese pronunciation: jung6
Meaning: praise, eulogy, verse/stanza, ode, eulogize, extol, laud

頌 (radical 真 xie2, head/face-related) originally meant appearance/looks. 頌 are verses in ancient literature: Indian 吠陀 (“Vedas”-transliterated, hymns of praise), Chinese 周頌 (Zhou1 song4 = Zhou-Dynasty-ceremonial-hymns accompanying state religious ceremonies). 頌揚 (song4 yang2 = praise-wave) = praise/eulogize.

頌歌 (song4 ge1 = praise-song) = song of praise. Choir performs 聖頌 (sheng4 song4 = sacred-praise/hymns/chants). At university ceremony bestowing honorary doctorate, 頌詞 (song4 ci2 = laudatory-speech/address/citation) 歌功頌德 (ge1 gong1 song4 de2 = sing-achievement-praise-virtue = praises honoree’s virtues and achievements).

快樂頌 (kuai4 le4 song4 = cheer-happy-praise) = Beethoven’s Ode to Joy. 希臘古瓶頌 (Xī1 La4 gu3 ping2 song4 = “Greece”-transliterated-ancient-bottle-praise) = Shelley’s Ode on a Grecian Urn. 芬蘭頌 (Fen1 Lan2 song4 = “Fin-land”-transliterated-praise) = Sibelius’ Finlandia.

by Diana Yue