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 man’s innate good nature

童  
Putonghua pronunciation: tong2  
Cantonese pronunciation: tung4  
Meanings: child


Philosopher 孟子 (Meng4 Zi3 = Mencius) used 孑子 (ru2 zi3 = young-child) to demonstrate human nature. 孑子牛 (ru2 zi3 niu2 = young-child’s-buffalo) means loving teacher/parent who, like a tame buffalo, lets pupil/child ride him.

by Diana Yue