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

Putonghua pronunciation: ying1
Cantonese pronunciation: ying1
Meanings: baby, infant

婴 (two 贝 bei4, seashell/treasure + 女 nü3, woman/female) = 嬰児 (ying1 er2 = baby-child): 男婴 (nan2 ying1 = male-baby = baby boy), 女婴 (nü3 ying1 = female-baby = baby girl), 棄婴 (qi4 ying1 = abandoned-baby).

Woman 十月懷胎 (shi2 yue4 huai2 tai1 = ten-month/month-hide/carry-womb = goes through 10 lunar months of pregnancy), 瓜熟蒂落 (gua1 shou2 di4 luo4 = melon-ripen stalk- fall = melon ripens/drops = gives smooth birth). 呱呱墜地 (gua1 guag1 duo4 di4 = “gua-gua”-sound-fall-to-ground) describes new-born baby crying.


by Diana Yue