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 right and wrong

判 Putonghua pronunciation: pan4
Cantonese pronunciation: poon3
Meanings: judge, verdict

判 = judge/assess. Examiners 判断 (pan4 duan4 = judge~ decide) candidates' proficiency. Doctors 研判 (yan2 pan4 = study~assess) patient's situation. 错判 (cuo4 pan4 = erroneous~ assessment), 冤判 (yuan1 pan4 = wrongful~judgment) have serious consequences.

裁判官 (cai2 pan4 guan1 = assess~judge~official = adjudicator/magistrate) 判案 (pan4 an4 = try/judge~cases). The accused 被判有罪 (bei4 pan4 you3 zui4 = receive~judgment~has~sin/guilt = is found/pronounced guilty), 判刑 (pan4 xing2 = judge~pronounce~sentence = is given sentence), 判罰款 (pan4 fa2 kuan3 = judge~pronounce~punish~money = is fined).

所羅門王 (su4 luo2 men2 Wang2 = “Solomon”-transliterated-king = King Solomon) 判斷是非 (pan4 duan4 shi4 fei1 = adjudicated~decided~right-and-wrong). Christians fear 最後審判 (zui4 hou4 shen3 pan4 = ultimate~last~trial~judgment = the Last Judgment).

by Diana Yue