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

井
Putonghua pronunciation: jing3
Cantonese pronunciation: jeng2
Meanings: well

Character 井 (= well) resembles enclosed hole: 水井 (shui2 jing3 = water-well), 礦井 (kuang4 jing3 = mining-well), 油井 (you2 jing3 = oil-well). Traditional houses have 天井 (tian1 jing3 = sky-well = patios).

Desert people 打井 (da3 jing3 = hit-well = dig well) for 井水 (jing2 shui3 = well-water). 井底蛙 (jing2 di3 wa1 = well-bottom-frog = frog inside well = poorly-informed/ignorant person) 坐井觀天 (zuo4 jing3 guan1 tian1 = sit-in-well-watch-sky = has limited vision). Lazy people 臨渴掘井 (lin2 ke3 jue2 jing3 = upon-thirsty-dig-well = make effort only when really urgent).

孟子 (Meng4 Zi3 = Mencius) tells story: Toddler playing near 井沿 (jing3 yan2 = well’s-brink) is about to 墮井 (duo4 jing3 = plunge/fall-into-well).

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