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

審

Putonghua pronunciation: shen3
Cantonese pronunciation: sam2
Meanings: study, examine, interrogate, judge, trial

Ideogram 審 (shen3, house’s roof) + 番 (fan1, animal’s feet) originally meant examining animal footprints indoors. 審慎 (shen3 shen4 = examine-cautious) = cautious. Art involves 審美 (shen3 mei3 = examine/judge-beauty = aesthetics).

Senators 審議 (shen3 yi3 = examine-discuss/debate) bill, 審核 (shen3 he2 = examine-verify) reports, 審批 (shen3 pi1 = examine-sign/approve = approve) budgets.

Policemen 審查 (shen3 cha2 = scrutinize-check) suspects, 審問 (shen3 wen4 = examine-ask = interrogate) detainees. Court holds 審訊 (shen3 xün4 = examine-ask = hearing/trial). 陪審團 (pei2 shen3 tuan2 = accompany-trial-group = jury) 審視 (shen3 shi4 = examine-look = examines) evidence. Judge 審判 (shen3 pan4 = examine-judge/decide = passes verdict on) accused.

Public boo at traitors at 公審 (gong1 shen3 = open/public-trial).

by Diana Yue