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

憐 (radical ⼈ = 心 xin1, heart) means pity/concern. Parents 憐愛 (lian2 ai4 = care-for-love) their children. Sentimental girl 憐惜 (lian2 xi1 = pity~regret) withered flowers. War victims are 可憐 (ke3 lian2 = can-pity = pitiable).

People in the same boat 同病相憐 (tong2 bing4 xiang1 lian2 = same-illness-mutual-pity = sympathize with each other). 搖尾乞憐 (yao2 wei3 qi3 lian2 = wave/wag-tail-beg-for-pity) describes puppies or person’s self-debasing gestures to seek help/forgiveness.

Mencius says: Everyone has 憐隱之心 (ce1 yin3 zhi1 xin1 = sorrow-grief~'s~heart = sorrow/sympathy for the danger/tragedy of others). 弱者 (ruo4 zhe3 = weak/fragile-people) in 危險 (wei1 xian3 = precipitous-danger), 不幸 (bu4 xing4 = not-fortunate = distress) need our 憐憐 (lian2 min3 = pity-commiseration).

by Diana Yue