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

智 (zhi4)
Cantonese pronunciation: ji3
Meanings: intelligent, clever, smart, wise

智 (zhi1, knowledge + 日 ri2, sun) means 才智 (cai2 zhi4 = talent/wit-cleverness), 智慧 (zhi4 hui4 = wise-clever = wisdom). 智商 (zhi4 shang1 = intelligence-quotient) = I.Q.

弱智 (ruo4 zhi4 = weak-clever) = mentally retarded.

智多星 (zhi4 duo1 xing1 = clever-plenty-star) = guy with abundant smart ideas. 智囊團 (zhi4 lang2 tuan2 = clever-bag-group) = think tank.

所羅門王 (Suo3 Luo2 Men2 wang2 = “So-lo-mon”-transliterated-king = King Solomon) is 智者 (zhi4 zhe3 = wise-person = sage). When two women 爭嬰 (zheng1 ying1 = fought-for-baby = claimed to be same baby’s mother), he ordered: 較為兩半! (pi3 wei2 liang3 ban4 = Chop-into-two-halves!) False mother’s assent is 不智 (bu4 zhi4 = not-wise = unwise/foolish)!

by Diana Yue