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:

1\text{st} tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2\text{nd} tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3\text{rd} tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4\text{th} 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**

**性**

Putonghua pronunciation: xing4

Cantonese pronunciation: sing3

Meanings: quality, nature, sex

性 (radical ↑ = 心 xin1, heart) = quality/nature: male/female 性别 (xing4 bie2 = sex/gender-distinction), person’s 個性 (ge4 xing4 = individual-character), car’s 性能 (xing4 neng2 = quality-function/efficiency). Daoism/Taoism categorizes 物性 (wu4 xing4 = things’ nature/essence) into 金 (jin1, metal), 木 (mu4, wood), 水 (shui3, water), 火 (huo3, fire), 土 (tu3, earth).

Novelists describe 人性 (ren2 xing4 = human-nature), characters’ 性格 (xing4 ge2 = nature-type = personalities). Fickle women 水性楊花 (shui3 xing4 yang2 hua1 = water’s-nature-poplar-flower = drift/change like water/poplar filaments). Speeding drivers are 性急 (xing4 ji2 = nature-urgent = impatient). Killer/rapist 獸性大發 (shou4 xing4 da4 fa1 = beast-nature-big-explose = turns wildly aggressive).

Mencius has positive view of mankind’s天性 (tian1 xing4 = heaven/natural-quality = innate nature).

by Diana Yue