The basic unit of the Chinese language is the zì (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each zì 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 zì together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each zì 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 zì 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 diet abstinence

Putonghua pronunciation: chêng2
Cantonese pronunciation: sing4
Meanings: honesty, sincerity, devotion

誠 (radical 言 yan2, word + 成 chêng2, complete) means truth/ honesty: 誠實 (chêng2 shì2 = honest-true) words, 誠意 (chêng2 yì4 = honest-idea/intent = sincere) invitation. Question: “真的?” (zhēn1 de0 = true-possessive) = “Is it true?” Answer: “誠然!” (chêng2 răn2 = honestly-yes = “In truth/certainly!”

Christian prayer-ending 誠心所願 (chêng2 xīn1 suǒ3 yuān4 = indeed-heart-which-wish = I/we truly mean/wish it) = Amen. Deflector 投誠 (tóu2 chêng2 = leap/join-honest = joins rival side). Reliable businessmen has 誠信 (chêng2 xìn4 = honesty-believe = credibility).

Buddhist shows 虔誠 (qiān2 chêng2 = devout-honest = piety) by 吃素 (chí1 suò4 = eating-vegetarian), hopes to redeem all slaughtered animals’ lives by his 精誠 (jīng1 chêng2 = spirit’s -honesty = absolute sincerity/devotion).