Character Builder

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 (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 Lent

黙
Putonghua pronunciation: mo4
Cantonese pronunciation: mak6
Meaning: silent, tacit, quiet, hushed, secretly

默 (radical 黑 hei1, black) means 靜默 (jing4 mo4 = quiet-silent). Students 默記 (mo4 ji4 = silently-memorize) text, 默書 (mo4 shu1 = silent-write = write out memorized/dictated passage). Teacher 默許 (mo4 xü3 = gives unspoken-consent to) using dictionaries. 默默無聞 (mo4 mo4 wu2 wen2 = silent-silent-no-hear/fame = unheard-of) starlet envies celebrities.

默劇 (mo4 jü2 = silent-drama = mime) actors have 默契 (mo4 qi4 = unvoiced/tacit mutual understanding). Eye-witness 打破沉默 (da3 po4 chen2 mo4 = hit-break-sunken-silence = breaks silence), testifies. Criminal 默然 (mo4 ran2 = silent-indeed = is speechless), 默認 (mo4 ren4 = silently-admits) he committed crime.

Lent is season for 默禱 (mo4 dao3 = silent-prayer), 默哀 (mo4 aii1 = silent-mourning) for death of Christ.

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