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

善
Putonghua pronunciation: shan4
Cantonese pronunciation: sin6
Meanings: good

善 = 善良 (shan4 liang2 = good-kind), is opposite of 惡 (e4, bad/evil). Smiles indicate 善意 (shan4 yi4 = good/friendly feeling/intention). 行善 (xing2 shan4 = walk/do-good) = perform good deeds. 善終 (shan4 zhong1 = good-end) = die a natural/peaceful death. 惡報 (e4 bao4 = bad-return) = fate’s punishment to evil-doers.

Mencius tells story: Seeing 孺子 (ru2 zi3 = young-child) about to 墮井 (duo4 jing3 = fall-into-well), we all rush to 搶救 (qiang3 jiu4 = snatch-save = rescue). Hence his 性善說 (xing4 shan4 shuo1 = nature-good-saying = doctrine about man’s innate good/benevolent nature).

Maxim “人之初, 性本善” (ren2 zhi1 chu1, xing4 ben3 shan4 = person~’s-beginning, nature~originally~good) means “Children are born with good/sweet nature”.

by Diana Yue