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 kindergartens

童 Putonghua pronunciation: tong2
Cantonese pronunciation: tung4
Meaning: child, virgin

童 (radical 立 li4, stand) = 兒童 (er2 tong2 = son/child-children), 孩童 (hai2 tong2 = child-children). 童年 (tong2 nian2 = child-years) = childhood. 童子軍 (tong2 zì0 jūn1 = child-diminutive-army) = boy/girl-scout.

Teachers like 童真 (tong2 zhen1 = children’s-sincerity/innocence/naivety), not 頑童 (wan2 tong2 = naughty-kids). 童心 (tong2 xin1 = child’s-heart) means child/adult’s playful/childlike sentiments, but 童身 (tong2 shen1 = child’s-body) means boy/girl/adult’s virginity. 戀童癖 (lian3 tong2 pi3 = love-child-obsession) = pedophilia.


by Diana Yue