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 conversion to Buddhism

修 (xiū1)
Cantonese pronunciation: sau1
Meanings: trim, decorate, modify, revise, build, repair, study, practice

修 = 修飾 (xiū1 shì1 = trim-decorate). 修甲 (xiū1 jiā3 = trim/treat-nails) = manicure. 不修邊幅 (bú4 xiū1 biān1 fū2 = no-trim-side-hem/edge = carelessly groomed, untidy/unkempt/disheveled).

修 = make/repair/revise: 修建 (xiū1 jiàn4 = build-construct), 修壩 (xiū1 bà4 = build-dams), 修車 (xiū1 chē1 = repair-cars). 修理 (xiū1 lǐ3 = treat-handle) means repair or beat up. 修辭 (xiū1 cí2 = decorate-words) = rhetoric. Editor 修改 (xiū1 gǎi3 = trim-alter = corrects/revises) texts.

In 1960s China denounced 蘇修 (Su1 xiū1 = “So”-viet-transliterated-revise = Soviet/Russian revisionism).

Taoists 修煉 (xiū1 liàn4 = practice-refine/smelt = practice spiritual/mystical exercises). Buddhists 修行 (xiū1 xíng2 = study-practice = study and practice Buddhist beliefs). 修道院 (xiū1 dào4 yuán4 = study-way/belief-college) = monastery/abbey.

by Diana Yue