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 faith

堅
Putonghua pronunciation: jian1
Cantonese pronunciation: gin1
Meaning: firm, strong, hard, sturdy

堅 (radical 土 tu3, earth/soil) means hard/strong/firm: 堅果 (jian1 guo3 = hard-fruit = hard-shelled nuts), 堅實 (jian1 shi2 = firm-solid) muscles, 堅強 (jian1 qiang2 = firm-strong) personality. 攻堅 (gong1 jian1 = attack-strong) means picking hard problems to solve.

堅毅 (jian1 yi4 = firm-courageous) people 堅守 (jian1 shou3 = firmly-defend/uphold) principles. Colonial power 船堅炮利 (chuan2 jian1 pao4 li4 = boats-strong-canons-sharp = has strong navy). Charging tanks 無堅不摧 (wu2 jian1 bu4 cui1 = nothing-firm-not-destroy = crush everything).

堅決 (jian1 jue2 = firm-decide) describes firm/determined attitude. 堅貞不二 (jian1 zhen1 bu4 er4 = firm-virginity-not-two/another) describes woman/subordinate’s unswerving fidelity to husband/superior. Priest conducts 堅信禮 (jian1 xin4 li3 = firm-faith-ceremony = confirmation) for converted Christians.

by Diana Yue