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 the prodigal son

恕
Putonghua pronunciation: shu4
Cantonese pronunciation: sue3
Meanings: forgive, spare, pardon

恕 (radical 心 (xin1 = heart) means 恕罪 (shu4 zui4 = forgive-sin/offence). Benevolent ruler 饒恕 (rao2 shu4 = spare-forgive = pardons), 赦免 (she4 mian3 = spare-exempt = spares) disobedient subject.

恕 indicates polite tone of voice. Sign outside restaurant says “吸煙者恕不招待” (x1i yan1 zhe3 shu4 bu4 zhao1 dai4 = inhale-smoke-person-forgive-not-beckon-treat = “Our apologies: smokers are not allowed”). “恕難從命!” (shu4 nan2 cong2 ming4 = forgive-difficult-follow-order = “Sorry, can’t obey your order”) is a polite but firm refusal.

Moralists preach 忠恕之道 (zhong1 shu4 zhi1 dao4 = loyal-forgive’s-principle = act honestly/loyally and be generous/forgiving to others). 仁慈 (ren2 ci2 = benevolent-kind) father 寬恕 (kuan1 shu4 = broad/lenient-forgive = forgives) prodigal son.