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 filial piety

孝
Putonghua pronunciation: xiao4
Cantonese pronunciation: haau3
Meanings: filial piety

儒家 (ru2 jia1 = scholar-school = Confucianism) advocates 孝道 (xiao4 dao = filial-piety-way/code). 父慈子孝 (fu4 ci2 zi3 xiao4 = father-kind-son-love-parents) describes harmonious father-son relationship.

Child shows 孝心 (xiao4 xin1 = filial-piety-heart = willingness to love/obey/serve parents) by 盡孝 (jin4 xiao4 = exhaust-filial-piety = doing the best for parents). Christianity’s Fifth Commandment is 孝順父母 (xiao4 shun4 fu4 mu3 = love/serve-obey-father-mother = honor your parents).

When parent dies, children 穿孝 (chuan1 xiao4 = wear-filial-piety), i.e. wear 孝服 (xiao4 fu2 = filial-piety-dress = black/white mourning dress). Chinese praise 孝子賢孫 (xiao4 zi3 xian2 sun1 = obedient-sons-good-grandsons), regard 無後 (wu2 hou4 = no-afterwards = lacking male descent) as 不孝 (bu4 xiao4 = not-filial-piety = violating filial code).

by Diana Yue