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 \ 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 Dunhuang

經

Putonghua pronunciation: jing1
Cantonese pronunciation: ging1
Meaning: warp, principle, route, text, classic, scripture, sutra.

經 (radical 纜 = 絲 si1, silk/thread) means route/principle. 經緯 (jing1 wei3 = warp-and-weft) also means longitude-and-latitude. Acupuncturist pricks needle into energy-spots in human body’s 經絡 (jing1 luo4 = nervous system’s channels—meridians). 經歷 (jing1 li4 = pass-through) = experience/adventure.

經典 (jing1 dian3 = principle, theme) = classic: Daoism’s 道經 (Dao4 De2 Jing1 = Way-Virtue-Classical = Daodejing), Christianity’s 聖經 (Sheng4 Jing1 = Holy-Bible), Islam’s 古蘭經 (gu3 lan2 jing1 = Qoran). 馬經 (ma3 jing1 = horse-classic/authority) = racing tips.

Chinese monks translated 佛經 (fo2 jing1 = Buddhist-sutras/scriptures) from Sanskrit/Pali. Preachers 講經 (jiang3 jing1 = expound-on-scriptures). Worshippers 唱經 (nian4 jing1 = recite-scriptures/prayers). 藏經洞 (cang2 jing1 dong4 = storing-sutras/caves) in Dunhuang is where millennium-old Buddhist scriptures were discovered in 1900.

by Diana Yue