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 Third World

施
Putonghua pronunciation: shi 1
Cantonese pronunciation: si 1
Meanings: apply, give, bestow

施 = 施行 (shi xing 12 = apply-act = execute): 施政 (shi zheng 14 = execute-rule = administrate).

Jesus preached "施比受為有福" (shi bi shou geng wei you fu 1344232 = give-compare-receive-even-more-is-has-blessing = “It is more blessed to give than to receive”). 布施 (bu shi 41 = spread-bestow) = alms-giving. Oxfam's Chinese name is “樂施會” (le shi hui 414 = enjoy/gladly-give-club/society).

Bankrupt communities need 援助 (yuan zhu 24 = help-support = aid): 贈醫 (zeng yi 41 = gift-doctor = medical aid), 施飯 (shi fan 14 = give-cooked-rice = freely-given food supplies). However, proud people may think accepting philanthropic 施捨 (shi she 13 = bestow-parting-from = money/things/favour bestowed patronizingly/condescendingly) is humiliating.

by Diana Yue