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 self-improvement

修
Putonghua pronunciation: xiu1
Cantonese pronunciation: sau1
Meaning: build, cultivate, improve, mend, repair, revise, study

修 (radical 修, decorate) means build/mend/revise.

Engineers 修路 (xiu1 lu4 = mend/build-roads). Student 修讀 (xiu1 du2 = improve-self-read = studies) Ph.D. Editor 修改 (xiu1 gai3 = improves-corrects) essay.

修飾 (xiu1 shi1 = repair-decorate) = adorn face/looks or polish writing/aesthetic style. Women 修身 (xiu1 shen1 = trim-body = keep body fit/slim), 修甲 (xiu1 jia3 = trim-nails). 修理 (xiu1 li3 = repair-attend-to) means repair utensil or manhandle/punish someone. 修正主義 (xiu1 zheng4 zu3 yi4 = revise-correct-principal-meaning) = revisionism.

Hermit 修行 (xiu1 xing2 = improve-behavior = practices ascetic/moral exercises). Confucian sage’s disciples 格物 (ge2 wu4 = contend-matter = apply reason/analysis to things), 致知 (zhi4 zhi1 = attain-knowledge), 修身 (xiu1 shen1 = mend-body = cultivate strict personal morals).

by Diana Yue