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

齊

Putonghua pronunciation: qi1
Cantonese pronunciation: chai4
Meaning: level, same, neat, together, uniform, complete, assemble, trim, govern

齊 (radical 齊 qi2, level) means 齊整 (qi2 zheng3 = neat-tidy), 齊備 (qi2 bei4 = fully-equipped). 到齊 (dao4 qi2 = arrive-complete) = have all assembled. 齊心合力 (qi2 xin1 he2 li4 = together-heart-combine-strength) = joining souls/efforts. 百花齊放 (bai2 hua1 qi2 fang4 = hundred-flowers-together-bloom) describes springtime’s glorious blooms.

Philosophically, 齊 means uniform/organized. Confucian ethics stresses order/priorities: 格物 (ge2 wu4 = contend-matter = apply reason/analysis to things), then 致知 (zhi4 zhi1 = attain-knowledge), then 修身 (xiu1 shen1 = mend-body = cultivate strict personal morals), then 齊家 (qi2 jia1 = organize/govern-family = put family in order).

But Taoist philosopher 莊子 (Zhuangzi 1 zhi3)’s 齊物論 (qi2 wu4 lun4 = Equality-of-Things-Treatise) stresses the equality/sameness of all existences in the universe.

by Diana Yue