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 moving

慈 (radical 心 xin1 = heart)
Putonghua pronunciation: ci2
Cantonese pronunciation: chi4
Meanings: kindness, mercy


佛陀 (fo2 tuo2 = Buddha) 拚身飼虎 (she3 shen1 si4 hu3 = sacrifice-body-feed-tiger = let himself be eaten by a starving mother tiger). Mahayana Buddhism, widespread in China and Japan, worships 菩薩 (pu2 sa4 = pusas = short for 菩提薩埵 pu2 ti2 sa4 duo3 = Bodhisattvas).

Bodhisattva 觀音 (guan1 yin1 = watch-(world's)-sounds/voices = Guanyin = Avalokitesvara) embodies 慈悲 (ci2 bei1 = kindness-compassion/pity = kindness, grace, mercy). Wives who want to get pregnant and bear sons pray to fertility-goddess 送子觀音 (song4 zi3 guan1 yin1 = send-son-Guanyin).

by Diana Yue