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 filial piety**

### 祖

**Putonghua pronunciation:** zu3  
**Cantonese pronunciation:** jo2  
**Meanings:** ancestry

祖 = ancestor/ancestral. 人猿 (ren2 yuan2 = human-ape = apes) are mankind’s 始祖 (shi3 zu3 = first-ancestors). Patriots praise 祖国 (zu3 guo3 = ancestral-country = fatherland/motherland). Genghis Khan received posthumous title 元太祖 (Yuan2 t'ai4 zu3 = Yuan-earliest-ancestor = founder of Mongolian Empire and China’s Yuan Dynasty, 1271-1368).

Traditional Chinese keep 族谱 (zu2 pu3 = clan-record = record of family trees), erect 祖廟 (zu3 miao4 = ancestral temples), 祭祖 (ji4 zu3 = offer-libations/sacrifices-to-ancestors), 拜祖先 (bai4 zu3 xian1 = worship-ancestors-predecessors = worship ancestors).

四世同堂 (si4 shi4 tong2 tang2 = four-generations-share-hall) means 曾祖父母 (zeng1 zu3 fu4 mu3 = previous-ancestral-father-mother = great-grandparents) and 祖父母 (zu3 fu4 mu3 = ancestral-father-mother = grandparents) living with younger generations.

by Diana Yue