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 Buddha subduing Monkey

猴 Putonghua pronunciation: hou2
Cantonese pronunciation: hau4
Meanings: monkey, ape, gibbon

猴 (radical  مجرد = 狗 gou3, dog/animal) = 猿猴 (yuan2 hou2 = gibbons-apes/moons). Novel 《西遊記》 (Xi1 You2 Ji4 = west-travel-record = Journey to the West) immortalized 唐僧 (Tang2 seng1 = Tang-Dynasty-monk = Xüanzang/Tripitaka) and disciples Monkey, Pigsy, Sandy.

孫悟空 (Sun1 Wu4 Kong1 = surname-Sun-understand-emptiness), aka 孫猴子 (Sun1 hou2 zi0 = surname-Sun monkey), Cantonese term 馬騅精 (ma3 liu2 jing1 = Cantonese “ma1 lau1 jing1” = monkey-demon), wields 金剛棒 (jin1 gang1 bang4 = gold-strong-club = Diamond Club), knows 七十二變 (qi1 shi2 er4 bian4 = seven-ten-two-changes = seventy-two/endless ways of self-transforming disguises).

頑皮 (huan2 pi2 = tough-skin = naughty/playful), 猴急 (hou2 ji3 = monkey-impatient = restless/impatient) Monkey is acrobatic star-role in Chinese opera.

by Diana Yue