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: $1 = \text{diacritical mark} \rightarrow \text{pitch}: 5 \rightarrow 5$, highest prolonged

2nd tone: $2 = \text{diacritical mark} / \text{pitch}: 3 \rightarrow 5$, middle to high

3rd tone: $3 = \text{diacritical mark} \ U \text{pitch}: 2 \rightarrow 1 \rightarrow 4$, low to lowest to high

4th tone: $4 = \text{diacritical mark} \ \text{pitch}: 5 \rightarrow 1$, 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

Putonghua pronunciation: xian1
Cantonese pronunciation: sin1
Meanings: previous, earlier, predecessor, bygone, deceased

先 means earlier/deceased: family’s 先人 (xian1 ren2 = earlier-people = ancestors), widow’s 先夫 (xian1 fu1 = late-husband), student’s 先師 (xian1 shi1 = late-teacher). 爭先恐後 (zeng1 xian1 kong3 hou4 = compete-for-ahead-afraid-of-behind) describes people scrambling for rations/seats. 先發制人 (xian1 fa1 zhi4 ren2 = earlier-launch-control-people) = pre-emptive move/strategy.

先生 (xian1 sheng1 = earlier-born) is honorific for man/teacher/lady-scholar. 先知 (xian1 zhi1 = beforehand-know = prophet) is nation’s 先驅 (xian1 qu1 = front-rider = herald/pioneer) preaching 先進 (xian1 jin4 = early-proceed = advanced) thought. Revolution’s 先烈 (xian1 lie4 = deceased/killed-violent) = revolutionary martyrs. 孫中山 (Sun1 Zhong1 Shan1 = Sun Yat-sen) is 革命先行者 (ge2 ming4 xian1 xing2 zhe3 = change-fate-early-walk-person = pioneer of Chinese Revolution).

by Diana Yue