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

佛 Putonghua pronunciation: fo2
Cantonese pronunciation: fat6
Meanings: Buddha

佛 (fo2, short for “佛陀” fo2 tuo2) means Buddha. Both are transliterations of the original 梵文 (fan2 wen2 = Sanskrit-language) name. 佛祖 (fo2 zu3 = Buddha-ancestor = the first Buddha = Sakyamuni) founded 佛教 (fo2 jiao4 = Buddha-religion = Buddhism).

In novel 《西遊記》(Xi You2 Ji4 = west-travel-record = Journey to the West), 唐僧 (Tang2 seng1 = Tang-Dynasty-monk = Xuanzang/Tripitaka) journeyed from 中國 (Zhong1 Quo2 = central-country = China) to 印度 (Yin4 Du4 = “India”-transliterated) to obtain 佛經 (fo2 jing1 = Buddhist scriptures/sutras).

佛法無邊 (fo2 fa3 wu2 bian1 = Buddha’s-law/power-no-edge) = Buddha is almighty. 口宣佛號 (kou3 xuan1 fo2 hao4 = mouth-exclaim-Buddha’s-title = proclaiming Buddha’s name) can vanquish demons.

by Diana Yue