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 old family money

Putonghua pronunciation: cheng2
Cantonese pronunciation: sing4
Meanings: receive, accept, admit, shoulder, bear, adopt, inherit

承 means receive/hold something from above. Beams 承受 (cheng2 shou4 = receive-accept = bear/support) weight of roof. Wrongdoer 承认 (cheng2 ren4 = accepts-admits) fault, 承擔 (cheng2 dan1 = accepts/shoulders) responsibility. 承辦商 (cheng2 ban4 shang1 = accept-handle-merchant) = contractor.

Newly-weds 承諾 (cheng2 huo4 = accept-promise = promise) fidelity. 膝下承歡 (xi1 xia4 cheng2 huan1 = knees-below-receive/support-joy) describes children clustered around loving parents’ knees. Son 續承 (ji4 cheng2 = next-adopt = inherits/ succeeds to) father’s fortune.

In culture/learning, 傳承 (chuan2 cheng2 = pass-on-accept = continuation/tradition) is respected. —脈相承 (yi1 mai4 xiang1 cheng2 = one-pulse/vein-mutual-adopt) describes trait/ideology inherited by like-minded generations. Great scholars 承先啟後 (cheng2 xian1 qi3 hou4 = adopt-previous-open-later = continue predecessors’ work, enlighten later generations).

by Diana Yue