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 Bodhisattva Guanyin

Putonghua pronunciation: guan1
Cantonese pronunciation: goon1
Meanings: watch, observe

観 (radical 見 jian4, see) means watch/observe intently: 閲觀 (guan1 kan4 = watch-look), 觀察 (guan4 cha2 = watch-note = inspect). Hongkong draws 可觀 (ke3 guan1 = can/deserve-watch = considerable) income from 觀光業 (guan1 guang1 ye4 = watch-light-industry = tourism).

Sage 観人於微 (guan1 ren1 yü1 wei1 = watch-people-at-micro = observes/judges people by their small things): their 観念 (guan1 nian4 = watch-idea = concepts), 観點 (guan1 dian3 = watch-point = views).

Buddhists worship 菩薩 (pu2 sa3 = 1st and 3rd syllables of Sanskrit “bodhisattva”), deities who help mankind attain salvation. Bodhisattva 観世音 (guan1 shi4 yin1 = watch-world's-sounds), i.e. 観音 (guan1 yin1 = Guanyin), listens to mankind’s pleas/prayers, shows慈善 (ci2 bei1 = kindness-grief = mercy/compassion).

by Diana Yue