Character Builder

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 going to church

Putonghua pronunciation: song4
Cantonese pronunciation: jung6
Meanings: praise

頌 (= 公 gong1, public + 頁 ye4, page) means praise only. During 圣誕節 (sheng4 dan4 jie2 = holy-birth-festival = Christmas) Christians 歌頌 (ge1 song4 = sing-praises about) birth of Christ.

Masses 頌揚 (song4 yang2 = praise-raise = emphatically praise/glorify) hero’s deeds. Chairman reads prize-winner’s 頌詞 (song4 ci2 = praise-words = eulogy/commendation). Lackey 歌頌功徳 (ge1 gong1 song4 de2 = sing-achievements-praise-virtues = orates on how successful/kind the boss is).

希臘古瓶頌 (Xi1 La4 gu3 ping2 song4 = “Greece”-transliterated-ancient-jar-praise) is Chinese translation of Shelley’s Ode on a Grecian Urn. 快樂頌 (kuai4 le4 song4 = cheerful-joyful-praise) is Chinese translation of Beethoven’s Ode to Joy. 香頌 (xiang1 song4 = fragrant-praise) is Chinese transliteration/translation of French vocal genre “chanson”.

by Diana Yue