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 \ 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

祷 (dao3)
Putonghua pronunciation: dao3
Cantonese pronunciation: to2
Meanings: pray, prayer

祷 = 祈祷 (qi2 dao3 = beseech-pray) = 禱告 (dao3 gao4 = pray-tell = pray to deity/God). Buddhists 唱經 (nian4 jing1 = recite/chant-sutras), 焚香祝禱 (fen2 xiang1 zhu1 dao3 = burn-incense-bless-pray = offer incense, wishes, prayers).

Catholic 默禱 (mo4 dao3 = silent-pray = prays silently), fingering 唸珠 (nian4 zhu1 = recite-beads = rosary). Priest speaking aloud leads congregation in 公禱 (gong1 dao3 = public-prayers). 代禱 (dai4 dao3 = represent-pray) = pray on behalf of others, e.g. sinners/patients.

Christians’ 主禱文 (zhu3 dao3 wen2 = master-pray-text = The Lord’s Prayer) ends with 阿們 (a4 men2 = 阿孟 = a4 meng4 = “amen”-transliterated) i.e. 誠心所願 (cheng2 xin1 suo3 yu4n4 = sincere-heart-’s-wish = genuinely from my heart).

by Diana Yue