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 children

真
Putonghua pronunciation: zhen 1
Cantonese pronunciation: jan 1
Meanings: real, authentic, true, truth, pure, purity


純真 (chún zhēn = pure=true) people have pure/artless personality. 天真 (tiān zhēn = heaven/nature=true) people are innocent/pure-minded/simplistic/credulous. Children are 天真無邪 (tiān zhēn wú yé = heaven/nature=true-without-evil = innocent, free from wicked/evil thoughts). Children’s 童真 (tóng zhēn = child=true/pure = childish innocence) amuses adults. However, adults behaving childishly/foolishly are derisively called “老天真!” (lǎo tian zhēn = “old-innocent!”).

真命天子 (zhēn mìng tiān zǐ = true-destiny-heaven’s-son = truly-chosen one) means truly-destined king/emperor or contest’s final winner or girl’s final choice of husband.

by Diana Yue