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: bai4
Cantonese pronunciation: baa4
Meanings: worship, make obeisance

Gesture 拜 means cupping hands, raising/lowering lower arms towards someone respectfully. 拜訪 (bai4 fang3 = respectful-gesture-visit = visit), 拜年 (bai4 nian2 = respectful-gesture-year) = pay New Year visit. 拜托 (bai4 tuo1 = respectful-gesture-delegate) means “Please (do me this favor)!”

拜 = respectfully/devoutly worship: 拜神 (bai4 shen2 = worship-deities/spirits), 拜佛 (bai4 fo2 = worship-buddha). 拜祖先 (bai4 zu3 xian1 = worship-ancestor-previous) = ancestral worship.

Church holds 聖誕崇拜 (sheng4 dan4 chong3 bai4 = holy-birth-lofty-worship = Christmas service). Christians 做禮拜 (zu04 li3 bai4 = do-rite-worship = attend worship/church). Hence 禮拜天 (li3 bai4 tian1 = rite-worship-day) is Sunday, church-going day, time-period 禮拜 (li3 bai4 = rite-worship = 星期 xing1 qi1 = stars-period = 週 zhou1, period) = week.

by Diana Yue