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: _MAILBOX_ 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 right and wrong

是
Putonghua pronunciation: shi4
Cantonese pronunciation: si6
Meanings: is, are, yes, right

是 = is: 我是神 (wo3 shi4 shen2 = I-am-God). Skeptic asks: 是友是敵? (shi4 you3 shi4 di2 = is-friend-is-enemy = Is he friend or foe?), 是真是假? (shi4 zhen1 shi4 jia3 = is-real/true-is-unreal/false = Can this be true/real?)

是誰? (shi4 shei2 = is-who) = Who is it? 是不是? (shi4 bu4 shi4 = is-not-is = Is that so? 是! (shi2, is) = Yes/right/correct! 不是! (bu4 shi4, not-is) = No! 賠不是 (pei2 bu4 shi4 = pay-damages-not-right) means apologizing for fault/offence.

不是人 (bu4 shi4 ren2 = no-is-human) describes cruel/treacherous characters. 一無是處 (yi4 wu2 shi4 chu4 = one/completely-has-no-right-place/thing) = good-for-nothing. Exclamation 真是! (zhen1 shi4 = real-is) = Really!

by Diana Yue