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 short lives

折
Putonghua pronunciation: zhe1, zhe2
Cantonese pronunciation: jit3
Meaning: twist, bend, break, discount, section

折 (radical 手 = hand shou3, hand) means 拆折 (ao3 zhe2 = bend-bent), 拆断 (zhe2 duan4 = bend-break), 转折 (zhuan3 zhe1 = turn-bend = twists and turns), 折扣 (zhe2 kou4 = bend-subtract) means sale discounts, e.g. 七折 (qi1 zhe2 = seven-subtract = 30% off).

Dancer suffers 骨折 (gu3 zhe2 = bones-broken), defies 挫折 (cuo4 zhe2 = fall-bend = defeats/failures). Fans 折服 (zhe2 fu2 = bend-humbly-respect = adore) him.


by Diana Yue