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 Halloween

鬼 (gui3) derived meaning from near-homonym 歸 (gui1, return), i.e. dead ghosts return to nature: 魂 (hun2, soul) back to 天 (tian1, heaven), 肉 (rou4, flesh) to 地 (di4, earth), 血 (xue3, blood) to 水 (shui3, water), 眼 (yan3, eyes) to 日月 (ri4 yue4 = sun-moon) etc. Myths say ghosts stay in 地獄 (di2 yu4 = earth/underground-prison = hell).

Buddhists observe 孟蘭節 (yu2 lan2 jie2 = Buddhism’s 鬼節 gui3 jie2 = ghosts-festival, 15th day, 7th lunar-month), 燒衣 (shao1 yi1 = burn-clothes = burn papier-maché symbolizing food/clothes) to 孤魂野鬼 (gu1 hun2 ye3 gui3 = orphan-soul-wild-ghost = homeless/destitute ghosts).

On 萬聖夜 (wan4 sheng4 ye4 = ten-thousand-saints-night/eve = All Hallows/Saints’ Eve, Halloween), people 扮鬼 (ban4 gui3 = impersonate/play-ghosts) for fun.

by Diana Yue