Character Builder

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 circuses

Putonghua pronunciation: xi4
Cantonese pronunciation: hei3
Meanings: play, drama, sport, joke, show, make fun of

戯 (radical 戈 gel, spear) = play/sport/fun/drama. 玩遊戲 (wan2 you2 xi4 = play-roam-game) = play games. 手機遊戲 (shou3 ji1 you2 xi4 = hand-machine-game) = mobile games. 兒戲 (er2 xi4 = child/childish-play) describes frivolous attitude/behavior.


馬戲班 (ma3 xi4 ban1 = horses-drama-troupe = circus) performs 連場好戲 (lian2 chang2 hao3 xi4 = successive-stage/act-good-drama = great shows in a row). However, cynic sighs: “人生如戲!” (ren2 sheng1 ru2 xi4 = human-life-removes-drama = As Shakespeare said: “All the world’s a stage!”)

by Diana Yue