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 operas

歌

Putonghua pronunciation: ge1
Cantonese pronunciation: goh1
Meanings: song, sing

Noun 歌 = 歌曲 (ge1 qu3 = song/singing): 藝歌 (yi4 ge1 = art-songs), 民歌 (min2 ge1 = folk-songs), 歌廳 (ge1 ting1 = song-hall = cabaret).

Verb 歌 = 唱歌 (chang4 ge1 = sing-songs). Chinese opera 戲曲 (xi4 qu3 = drama-singing) combines 唱 (chang4, singing), 做 (zuo4, do = acting), 舞 (wu3, dancing), 拍和 (pai1 he2 = clapper-beat-harmony = orchestral accompaniment). Female impersonator 梅蘭芳 (Mei2 Lan2 Fang1, 1894-1961) overwelmed 京劇 (jing1 xi4 = capital-drama = Beijing opera), 崑曲 (kun1 qu3 = Kunshan-opera) fans.

Poet laments: “對酒當歌!” (dui4 ji3 dang1 ge1 = face-wine/liquor-should-sing = “Drink, enjoy, sing!”), “人生幾何?” (ren2 sheng1 ji3 he2 = human-life-how-much = “How long can life last?”)