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:

1\text{st} tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged
2\text{nd} tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high
3\text{rd} tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high
4\text{th} 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


diagram

Cantonese pronunciation: cheung3
Meanings: sing

唱 = 唱歌 (chang4 ge1 = sing-songs). 歌唱家 (ge1 chang4 jia1 = song-sing-master = vocalist) 獨唱 (du2 chang4 = alone-sing = sings solo). Unaccompanied 合唱團 (he2 chang4 tuan2 = combine-sing-group = choir/chorus) performs 清唱 (qing1 chang4 = pure-sing = a cappella).


Pop-group releases 唱片 (chang4 pian4 = sing-piece = records/CDs). 唱片騎師 (chang4 pian4 qi2 shi1 = sing-piece-ride-master = disc jockey) works in 的士高 (di1 shi4 gao1 = “disco”-transliterated). Talk of RMB appreciating 高唱入雲 (gao1 chang4 ri4 yun2 = high-sing-into-clouds = is soaring/getting real hot).

by Diana Yue