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 Journey to the West

西
Putonghua pronunciation: xī
Cantonese pronunciation: sai1
Meanings: west

In Chinese world-view, China is 中國 (Zhong1 Guo2 = Middle-Kingdom), Japan is 東洋 (dong1 yang2 = eastern-ocean), Europe/America is 西洋 (xi1 yang2 = western-ocean). 西化 (xi1 hua4 = west-transform = westernized) Chinese wear 西服 (xi1 fu = western-clothes), enjoy 西餐 (xi1 can1 = western-dishes/cooking).

In novel Journey to the West, Tripitaka travelled westwards across 西域 (Xi1 Yu4 = Western-Regions, today's 新疆 Xin1 Jiang1 = Xinjiang) to 西天 (xi1 tian1 = western-heaven), i.e. India, where 佛教 (fo2 jiao4 = Buddha-religion = Buddhism) flourished. Buddhists believe people go to 西方極樂世界 (xi1 fang1 ji2 le4 shi14 jie4 = west-direction-ultimate-happiness-world-border = Western Paradise) after death. 一命歸西 (yi1 ming4 gui1 xi1 = one-life-returns-west) means someone dies.

by Diana Yue