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 \ 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 memory

刻
Putonghua pronunciation: ke1
Cantonese pronunciation: hak1
Meaning: cut, incise, etch, inscribe, sculpt

刻 (radical 刀 = dao1, knife) = 雕刻 (diao1 ke4 = sculpt-carve/etch/engrave): 木刻 (mu4 ke1 = wood-carving), 石刻 (shi2 ke1 = stone-carving), 刻印 (ke1 yin4 = carve-print = Chinese art of seal-engraving).

刻板 (ke4 ban3 = carve-woodblock) means rigid/unimaginative. In fable, stupid man who dropped sword from moving boat into sea 刻舟求剑 (ke1 zhou1 qiu2 jian4 = etched-mark-on-boat-to-seek-sword), fished for sword near mark after boat shored.

Novel describes lovers' 刻骨铭心 (ke4 gu3 ming2 xin1 = carve-bone-engrave-heart = unforgettable) romance, 刻哀幺微 (ke4 hua4 ru4 wei1 = incise-draw-into-tiny = gives detailed/fine descriptions). Writer 刻意 (ke4 yi4 = carve-idea = deliberately) chooses tragic ending, giving readers 深刻 (shen1 ke4 = deeply-engraved = deep/profound) impact.

by Diana Yue