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 furniture

架
Putonghua pronunciation: jia4
Cantonese pronunciation: gar1
Meaning: rack, shelf, erect, construct, frame, structure, support, fight

架 (加 jia1, add + 木 mu4, wood) means 架構 (erected-structure), 框架 (kuang1 jia4 = frame-support). Workmen build 棧架 (peng2 jia4 = wooden/bamboo-frame-scaffolding), 書架 (shu1 jia4 = book-racks/shelves), 花架 (hua1 jia4 = flower-trellises). 架床叠屋 (jia4 chuang2 die2 wu1 = pile-up-beds-layer-rooms) describes plan/writing containing redundant parts.

Models are good 衣架子 (yi1 jia4 zi0 = clothes-rack-diminutive = have body frame for carrying clothes). Snobs 擔架子 (bai3 jia4 zi0 = pose/display-haughty-gestures/airs).

Dissidents 打架 (da3 jia4 = hit/beat-fight), 吵架 (chao3 jia4 = bicker/quarrel-fight = lash/trade abuses), 架空 (jia4 kong1 = lift/suspend-off-ground = disable) congress. Death-penalty prisoners fear 絞架 (jiao3 jia4 = twist/wring/hang-rack = gallows), 十字架 (shi2 zi4 jia4 = ten/“十”-character-shaped-rack = crucifix/cross).

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