The basic unit of the Chinese language is the zì (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each zì 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 zì together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

This week: Words about music

Pronunciation: xi (Putonghua, 4th tone), hei (Cantonese 3rd tone)
Basic meaning: drama, opera

The character 戏 (xì) means drama. 歌劇 (gē jù = songs-drama) means western operas, e.g. “阿伊達” (a i da = “Aida” transliterated).

Chinese operas are 戏曲 (xì qu = drama-songs), and performing them is called 唱戏 (chàng xì = sing-drama), emphasizing the singing. Major branches include 崑劇 (Kūn jù = Kunshan-opera), 京劇 (jīng jù = Beijing opera), 川劇 (Chuān jù = Sichuan opera). Opera roles are classified into 生 (shēng, young male), 旦 (dàn, young female), 丑 (chóu, clown), 淨 (jìng, personality).

戲子 (xì zǐ = drama-persons) are professional opera-singers. 票友 (piào yǒu = ticket/amateur-friend) are amateurs. 人生如戲 (rén shēng rú xì = man-life-like-drama/opera) echoes Shakespeare’s line “All the world’s a stage”.

by Diana Yue