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 circuses

技

Putonghua pronunciation: ji4
Cantonese pronunciation: gei6
Meanings: skill, technique, knack

技 (jí = 手 shou3, hand + 支 zhi1, support) means 技能 (ji4 neng2 = skill-ability), 技術 (ji4 shu4 = technique-technology), 技巧 (ji4 qiao3 = skill-dexterity). 技 (yi1 ji4 bang4 shen1 = one-skill-accompanying-body = training in one area) helps 技工 (ji4 gong1 = skilled-worker/technician) survive.

技癢 (ji4 yang3 = skill-itch) = yearning to perform. 技窮 (ji4 qiong2 = skill-exhaust) = running out of tricks/solutions. 雕蟲小技 (diao1 chong2 xiao3 ji4 = carving-insect-small/lowly-skill) means un-praiseworthy knack or artist’s modest description of his work.

零技 (za2 ji4 = mixed-skills) = tricks/acrobatics. Viewers watching 特技 (te4 ji4 = special-skill = stunts) shout: “神乎其技!” (shen2 hu1 qi2 ji4 = god/supernatural-oh-his-skill = “Incredible/Amazing!”)