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 operas

劇
Putonghua pronunciation: ju4 Cantonese pronunciation: kek6 Meanings: drama

劇 = 戲劇 (xi4 ju2 = play/act-drama). 百老匯 (bai2 lao3 hui4 = “Broadway”-transliterated) stages 歌舞劇 (ge1 wu3 ju2 = sing-dance-drama = musicals). TV runs 肥皂劇 (fei2 zao4 ju2 = fat-soap-drama = soap operas).

China has many 地方劇 (di4 fang1 xi4 = land-area-drama = regional operas). Hong Kong has 粵劇 (yue4 ju2 = Cantonese-drama = Cantonese opera), 粵曲 (yue4 qu3 = Cantonese-song = classical-style Cantonese songs) tradition.

西洋歌劇 (xi1 yang2 ge1 ju2 = west-ocean-song-drama) means western opera. 劇情 (ju2 qing2 = drama-emotion/event = plot) involves 愛 (ai4, love), 恨 (hen4, hate). Verdi’s Aida is 悲劇 (bei1 ju2 = sorrow-drama = tragedy). Mozart’s Marriage of Figaro is 喜劇 (xi3 ju2 = happy-drama = comedy).