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 Los Angeles

影
Putonghua pronunciation: ying3
Cantonese pronunciation: ying2
Meanings: shadow, reflection, movie

影 (radical 亻 shan1, woolly/floral frilling) = 影子 (ying3 zi0 = shadow-diminutive): 人影 (ren2 ying3 = person’s-shadow/silhouette), 倒影 (dao3 ying3 = reversed-shadow = reflection).

導演 (dao3 yan3 = guide-act = directors) shoot 電影 (dian4 ying3 = electric-shadows = 影片 ying3 pian4 = shadows-piece = films/movies) in 片場 (pian4 chang3 = film/movie-field = film studios). 好萊塢 (he2 li3 huo2 = 好萊塢 hao3 lai2 wu1 = “Hollywood”-transliterated) is 夢工廠 (meng4 gong1 cang3 = dream-work-factory = dream factory).

影星 (ying3 xing1 = movie-stars), 迪士尼動畫 (di2 shi2 ni2 dong4 hua4 = “Disney”-transliterated-animation-films/cartoons), 奧斯卡獎 (ao4 si1 ka1 jiang3 = “Oscar”-transliterated-awards) glamorize US’s 軟實力 (ruan3 shi2 li4 = soft-solid-strength = soft power).

by Diana Yue