Character Builder

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 electricity

照 (radical 火 = 火 huo3, fire) suggests firelight/sunlight’s brightness/reflection. 照耀 (zhao4 yao4 = shine-bright) = shine. 照射 (zhao4 she4 = shine-shoot) = radiate/cast light. 日照時段 (ri4 zhao4 shi2 duan4 = sun-shine-time-section) = daylight period/duration.

照鏡 (zhao4 jing4 = shine/reflect-mirror) = look at oneself in the mirror. 拍照 (pai4 zhao4 = pat-reflect-image) = take photograph. 照片 (zhao4 pian4 = shine/reflect-piece) = photo. X-ray 照出 (zhao4 chu1 = reflect-image-out = shows) ulcer.

Sun 普照萬物 (pu3 zhao4 wan4 wu4 = all-shine-ten-thousand-things = shines on all the world). 夕陽斜照 (xi2 yang2 xie2 zhao4 = evening-sun’s-slanting-rays) generates 夕照 (xi2 zhao4 = evening-glow). 電燈 (dian4 deng1 = electric-lamps) provide 照明 (zhao4 ming2 = shine-bright = lighting).

by Diana Yue