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 \ 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

Putonghua pronunciation: jue2
Cantonese pronunciation: gok3
Meanings: horn, corner (jiao3), compete, role, part (jue2)

角色 (jue2 se1 = role-color) = acting role/part. Play/movie/opera 導演 (dao2 yan3 = direct-act = director) picks 演員 (yan3 yuan2 = act-member = actors/actresses) to play 主角 (zhu3 jue2 = major/lead-actor/actress), 配角 (pe1 jue2 = minor/accompanying-actor/actress). Olivier, Chaplin are 名角 (ming2 jue2 = famous-actors).

In Chinese opera, 生 (sheng1, young male role), 旦 (dan4, young/old female role), 丑 (chou3, clown role), 淨 (jing4, middle-/old-age male role) have different 唱腔 (chang4 qiang1 = singing styles), 做手 (zuo4 shou3 = do/act-hand = hand gestures), 身段 (shen1 duan4 = body-section = body language).

人生如戲 (ren2 sheng1 ru2 xi4 = human-life-ressemble-drama = “All the world’s a stage”). Most people play 小角色 (xiao2 jue2 se1 = little-role-color = insignificant roles).

by Diana Yue