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 Journey to the West

Putonghua pronunciation: mo2
Cantonese pronunciation: moh1
Meanings: demon

Buddhism defines 魔 (mo2 = Sanskrit—“Mara”—transliterated) as 惡魔 (e4 mo2 = wicked-demon), 妖魔 (yao1 mo2 = evil-demons) which destroy Buddha’s followers. Christianity’s 魔鬼 (mo2 gui3 = demon-ghost) is Satan.

In Journey to the West, Tripitaka’s disciples vanquished 妖魔鬼怪 (yao1 mo2 gui3 guai4 = evil-fairies-demons-ghosts-monsters): 蜘蛛精 (zhì zhū jīng1 = spider-fairies), 白骨精 (bái gu3 jīng1 = white-bones/skeleton-fairy), 牛魔王 (niú2 mo2 wāng2 = bull-demon-king). Wise men say: “魔由心生!” (mo2 you2 xīn1 shēng1 = demon-from-heart-born = “Our imagination creates our own demons!”)

Women fear 色魔 (sè1 mo2 = color-demon = rapist/women-killer). Hostile media 妖魔化 (yao1 mo2 huā4 = evil-fairy-demon-transform = demonize/blacken) target. 魔術師 (mo2 shū4 shī1 = demon-power-master) = sorcerer/magician/illusionist.

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