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 Madame White Snake

蛇

Putonghua pronunciation: she2
Cantonese pronunciation: se4
Meanings: snake

In Chinese mythology, god 伏羲 (Fu2 Xi1) and goddess 女媧 (Nu3 Wa1) are 人首蛇身 (ren2 shou3 she2 shen1 = human-head-snake-body). 蛇 is one of 十二生肖 (shi2 er4 sheng1 xiao4 = ten-two-birth-resemblance = twelve signs of the Chinese zodiac).

Christians say 毒蛇 (du2 she2 = poisonous-snake) is 撒但 (Sa1 Dan4 = “Satan”-transliterated), 魔鬼 (mo2 gui3 = demon-ghost = the Devil). 蛇頭 (she2 tou2 = snake-head) trades 人蛇 (ren2 she2 = persons-snake = illegal immigrants). Verb 蛇王 (she2 wang2 = snake-king) in Hong Kong lingo means sneaking out from work.

白蛇 (bai2 she2 = white-snake) and 青蛇 (qing1 she2 = bluish-green-snake) are heroines of Chinese myth 白蛇傳 (bai2 she2 zhu4 = white-snake-legend).

by Diana Yue