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

恋 (radical 心 xin1, heart) means love. 恋人 (lian4 ren2 = love-person) = lover. 談戀愛 (tan2 lian4 ai4 = talk-love-love) = lovers seeing each other. 熱戀 (re4 lian4 = hot-love) = deeply in love. 失戀 (shi1 lian4 = lose-love) = dumped by lover. 戀母狂 (lian4 mu3 kuang2 = love-mother-mania) = Oedipus complex.

Young scholar 許仙 (Xu3 Xian1) met 白娘娘 (Bai2 Niang2 Niang2 = White-lady-lady = Madame White) and her maid 小青 (Xiao3 Qing1 = little-green) in beautiful 杭州 (Hang2 Zhou1 = Hangzhou).

Xu Xian迷戀 (mi2 lian4 = obsess-love = crazily loved) Madame White, not knowing they were白蛇精 (bai2 she2 jing1 = white-snake-demon) and 青蛇精 (qing1 she2 jing1 = bluish-green-snake-demon).

by Diana Yue