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 fortune-telling

卜
Putonghua pronunciation: bu3
Cantonese pronunciation: buk1
Meanings: forecast fortune

Ancient Chinese soothsayers scorched 甲骨 (jia3 gu3 = shell~ bone = tortoise-shells and ox-bones = oracle bones) to 占卜 (zhan1 bu3 = observe-forecast = interpret scorched cracks on oracle bones, forecast person/country's fortune). Today's Chinese 占卦 (zhan1 gua4 = get-interpret-divination-diagrams from the I Ching), 求籤 (qiu2 qian1 = get-interpret-divination-sticks) at temples, welcome 上籤 (shang4 qian1 = top/good~ fortune-forecast), worry about 下籤 (xia4 qian1 = bottom/bad- fortune-forecast).

Fortune-tellers also 卜夢 (bu3 meng4 = interpret-dreams), 看相 (kan4 xiang4 = observe-interpret-facial-features), 看手相 (kan4 shou3 xiang4 = observe-interpret-hand-features = read palms), read 塔羅牌 (ta3 luo2 pai2 = “Tarot”-transliterated-cards).

前途未卜 (qian2 tu2 wei4 bu3 = ahead-path-not-yet-forecasted) means uncertain/unclear future, but Buddhists believe 積業 (ji1 ye4 = accumulated/past-works/doings, i.e. karma) affects fortune.

by Diana Yue