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 attires**

鞋 (radical 革 ge2 = leather)

Putonghua pronunciation: xie2
Cantonese pronunciation: haai4
Meanings: shoes

鞋 = 鞋子 (xie2 zi0 = shoe-diminutive). 布鞋 (bu4 xie2 = cloth-made-shoes) are traditional Chinese footwear. Rustics wear 草鞋 (cao3 xie2 = straw-shoes/sandals), 木屐 (mu4 ji1 = wooden-clogs). City-dwellers wear 皮鞋 (pi2 xie2= leather-shoes). Sprinters wear 釘鞋 (ding1 xie2 = pin/spike-shoe = track spikes). 雨靴 (yu3 xue1 = rain-boot) = wellington boots. 马靴 (ma3 xue1 = horse-boot) = riding boots. 手套 (tuo1 xie2 = drag-shoes = slippers), 懒佬鞋 (lan3 luo3 xie2 = lazy-chap-shoe = loafers) have soft 鞋底 (xie2 di3 = shoe-bottom = soles), no 鞋带 (xie2 dai4 = shoe-strings).

踏破鐵鞋無覓處 (ta1 po4 tie3 xie2 wu2 mi4 chu4 = tread-break-iron-shoes-no-search-place) describes prolonged/difficult/fruitless search for rare/hidden object/person.

by Diana Yue