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

Putonghua pronunciation: bi4
Cantonese pronunciation: pik1
Meanings: dispel, drive away, subdue, exorcise evil spirits, counteract evil force


On 端午節 (Duan1 Wu3 Jie2 = first-fifth-festival = fifth day of Fifth Lunar Month = Dragon Boat Festival Day), hot weather makes 五毒 (wu3 du2 = five-poisonous-pests = snakes, centipedes, scorpions, lizards, toads) rampant. Mineral 雄黃 (xiong2 huang2 = male-yellow = rabiagar) can 辟邪 (bi4 xie2 = dispel-evil = exorcise/subdue their evil influence).

Advised by exorcist, 許仙 (Xu3 Xian1) made Madame White swallow rabiagar drink. She immediately 現形 (xian4 xing2 = showed-her-true-form): a snake!

by Diana Yue