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 ancient fables

Putonghua pronunciation: yü2
Cantonese pronunciation: yue1
Meanings: a kind of reed instrument

竿 (radical 竹 zhu2, bamboo) = ancient Chinese 吹奏樂器 (chui1 zou4 yue4 qi4 = blow-perform-musical-instrument = wind instrument).

Fable: King of 齊 (State of Qi2) loved listening to 吹竿 (chui1 yü2 = blowing-yü2), hired 300 yü2-players to 合奏 (he2 zou4 = combine-perform = play together), including 南郭先生 (nan2 guo2 xian1 sheng1 = south-city-gate-mister = a guy from southern district), a fake. When King died, the new King ordered 獨奏 (du2 zou4 = solo-performances). The guy fled because he was 濫竽充數 (lan4 yü2 chong1 shu4 = surplus-yü2-fill-number = unskilled/incompetent, just making up the total).

Newcomer addresses peers modestly: “I’m just 濫竽充數 = I’m not so good. 請包涵 = qing3 bao1 han2 = please-understand/tolerate!”

by Diana Yue