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

鎮 (radical 金 jin1, gold/metal) means weight, base, suppression: 紙鎮 (zhi3 zhen4 = paper-weight), 冰鎮 (bing1 zhen4 = ice-weight) = chill with ice-cubes, 小鎮 (xiao3 zhen4 = small-town), 重鎮 (zhong4 zhen4 = heavy-town/base = militarily/professionally important town/unit/person).

Army鎮壓 (zhen4 ya1 = suppresses-crushes) uprising, 鎮守 (zhen4 shou3 = militarily-holds-guards) frontiers. Buddhist abbot 法顯 (Fa3 Xian3) tells 譚仙 (Xu3 Xian1): 鎮定 (zhen4 ding4 = weigh-not-move = Be calm!) I can 鎮妖 (zhen4 yao1 = suppress-demons), 鎮邪 (zhen4 xie2 = suppress-evil-spirits/forces!)

Legend ends: Madame White used magic to 水漫金山 (shui3 man4 Jin1 Shan1 = water-flood-Gold-Hill = flood Gold Hill Monastery), but was 永鎮雷峰塔 (yong3 zhen4 Lei2 Feng1 Ta3 = eternally-suppressed/imprisoned-under-Thunder-Peak-Pagoda) in Hangzhou.

by Diana Yue