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

鞋 (radical 革 ge2, leather) = 鞋子 (xie2 zi0 = shoe-diminutive):
皮鞋 (pi2 xie2 = leather-shoes), 布鞋 (bu4 xie2 = cloth-made-shoes), 拖鞋 (tuo1 xie2 = drag-shoes = slippers), 鞋带 (xie2 dai4 = shoe-laces).

鞋 (= 踏 lü3, shoe) must fit 脚 (jiao3 = 足 zu2, foot/feet). Fable
郑人买履 (Zheng4 ren2 mai3 lü3 = Zheng-state-person-buy-shoes): In State of Zheng’s 市集 (shi4 ji2 = buy-sell-gathering = market), man wanted to 試鞋 (shi4 xie2 = try-on-shoes), went home to get his feet’s 尺寸 (chi4 cun4 = feet-inches = length/measurements). When he returned, the market was closed.

Lesson: Stupid men 信度 (xin4 du4 = trust-measurements/rules), 無自信 (wu2 zi4 xin4 = no-self-trust = do not trust themselves = have no self-confidence).

by Diana Yue