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 fortune-telling

凶 (xiong1 zhao4 = unlucky/bad-omen) portends 倒霉 (dao3 mei2 = toppled-mould = luckless), 凶险 (xiong1 xian3 = terrible-dangerous) events. 通书 (tong1 shu1 = through-book = fortune-telling almanac) predicts 灾祸 (zai1 huo4 = calamity-misfortune) may fall on 凶日 (xiong1 ri4 = bad-luck-days), advises ways to 趋吉避凶 (qu1 ji2 bi4 xiong1 = approach/follow-fortune~avoid-misfortune).

凶神恶煞 (xiong1 shen2 e4 sha4 = bad-gods-evil-demons = fierce devils) describes fierce/threatening people/gestures. 窮凶極惡 (qiong2 xiong1 ji2 e4 = exhaust-fierce-most-bad/evil) describes merciless bullies/oppressors.

Police calculate kidnapped children 凶多吉少 (xiong1 duo1 ji2 shao3 = bad-luck-more-good-luck-less = probably met ill fate), but maybe they 遇凶化吉 (feng2 xiong1 hua4 ji2 = meet-misfortune-transform-into-fortune = luckily avoided misfortune and are safe).

by Diana Yue