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 storytelling

折
Putonghua pronunciation: zhe1, zhe2
Cantonese pronunciation: jìt3
Meaning: twist, bend, section

折 (radical 手 = shou3, hand) = 折折 (ao3 zhe2 = bend-bent), 折断 (zhe2 duan4 = bend-break). Accident victim has 骨折 (gu3 zhe2 = bones-broken). Retailer gives 折扣 (zhe2 kou4 = bend-subtract = discount), e.g. 八折 (ba1 zhe2 = eight-subtract = 20% off).

Hero experiences 折磨 (zhe2 mo2 = bend-grind = physical/mental torment/torture), defies 挫折 (cuo4 zhe2 = fall-bend = defeats/failures). Onlookers 折服 (zhe2 fu2 = bend/humbly-respect him).

Story-line 轉折 (zhuan3 zhe1 = turn-bend = has twists and turns): lovers re-unite after 一波三折 (yil bo1 san1 zhe2 = one-wave-three-twists = many mishaps). Narrator tells 一折 (yil zhe2 = one-section/excerpt), asserts plot is 不折不扣 (bu4 zhe2 bu4 kou4 = no-discount-no-subtract = absolutely/fully) presented.

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