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

巫 (ideogram resembling dancing shaman waving sleeves) = shaman. 巫醫 (wu1 yi1 = shaman/witch-doctor) performs 巫術 (wu1 shu4 = shaman-method = shamanism) for healing. 巫師 (wu1 shi1 = shaman-master/wizard), 女巫 (nu3 wu1 = woman-shaman/witch) are 神媒 (shen2 mei2 = gods’ spirits’-go-between = medium) who communicate with 鬼神 (gui3 shen2 = ghosts-gods/spirits).

Worshippers 求神卜 (qiu2 shen2 wen4 bu3 = beg-gods-ask-fortune-forecast = seek divination), believe 神諭 (shen2 yu4 = god’s-edict = oracle) foretells 吉凶 (ji2 xiong1 = fortune-misfortune), recite 咒語 (zhou4 yu3 = bless-curse-words = incantations), wear 符咒 (fu2 zhou4 = symbol-curse = spells) to 趨吉避凶 (qu1 ji2 bi4 xiong1 = approach/follow-fortune-avoid-misfortune = find luck), unaware it is 迷信 (mi2 xin4 = lost/misled/infatuated-belief = superstition).

by Diana Yue