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 photographers

影
Pronunciation: ying3
Cantonese pronunciation: ying2
Meanings: shadow, shade, reflection, silhouette

光 (guang1, light) shines on forms, casts 影子 (ying3 zi0 = shadow-diminutive = shadows/silhouettes). Painter studies 光影 (guang1 ying3 = light-shadows = shades/charoscuro). 攝影 (she4 ying3 = absorb-shadow = photography) captures 影像 (ying3 xiang4 = shadows-images). 影印本 (ying3 yin4 ben3 = shadow-print-version) means xerox/photocopy. Girl poses to 留影 (liu2 ying3 = preserve-shadow = have picture taken).


影評人 (ying3 ping2 ren2 = shadow-criticize-person = movie critic) rates 影視節目 (ying3 shi4 jie2 mu4 = shadow/movie-visual/TV-section-item = movie and TV programs).

by Diana Yue