Character Builder

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 practice


Traitor 背叛 (bei4 pan4 = turns-his-back-on-betrays) leader. Camel/scapegoat 背負 (bei4 fu4 = back-carry = carries) load/blame. Fabrics have 面 (mian4, top-carry), 背 (bei4, reverse-side), hence 背書 (bei4 shu1 = back/reverse-book) means put books behind, memorize books’ contents, learn by rote.

Actors 背台詞 (bei4 tai2 ci2 = memorize-stage-lines). Taiji practitioners 背口訣 (bei4 kou3 jue2 = memorize-mouth-rhyme = memorize/recite jingle for prompting learners). Scholars 背詩 (bei4 shi1 = recite-poetry).

by Diana Yue