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

Putonghua pronunciation: hui2
Cantonese pronunciation: wooi4
Meaning: return, reverse, winding, whirling, respond, chapter, segment, time, round

回 (radical □ kou3, mouth) = whirl/return/respond: 回去 (hui2 qü4 = return-go = depart/go back), 回答 (hui2 da2 = respond/answer), 回家 (hui2 jia1 = return-home), 回憶 (hui2 yi1 = again-recall = memories), 回合 (hui2 he2 = chapter-close) = bout/round in fight/game.

章回小說 (zhang1 hui2 xiao3 shuo1 = chapter-chapter-little-talk) are traditional Chinese novels. Each 回 (hui2, chapter/episode/sequence)'s 回目 (hui2 mu4= chapter-subject/heading) summaries chapter's events.

Story starts: “有一回...” (you3 yi1 hui2 = has-one-time = "Once...")

上回 (shang4 hui2 = before/previous-chapter)'s events develop in下回 (xia4 hui2 = after/next-chapter). Want to know what's coming? “請看下回分解” (qing3 kan4 xia4 hui2 fen1 jie3 = please read/watch what the next chapter says.”

by Diana Yue