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:

1\(^{st}\) tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2\(^{nd}\) tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3\(^{rd}\) tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4\(^{th}\) 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 witches

Putonghua pronunciation: wu1
Cantonese pronunciation: mo4
Meanings: shaman, witch, wizard, medium, witchcraft, sorcery

Character 巫 shows two 人 (ren2, person) mediating between heaven (upper horizontal stroke) and earth (lower horizontal stroke). 神巫 (shen2 wu1 = gods’/spirits’-witches) are 精媒 (ling2 mei2 = spiritual-mediums).

巫师 (wu1 shi1 = witch-master = mediums/shamans) perform 祭祀 (ji4 si4 = sacrifice-sacrificial-site = sacrificial ceremonies), predict 吉凶 (ji2 xiong1 = fortunes and misfortunes). 巫医 (wu1 yì1 = witch/voodoo-doctors) use 巫術 (wu1 shu2 = witch-craft) to treat diseases.

In Shakespeare’s The Tempest, 男巫 (nan2 wu1 = male-wizard/sorcerer) Prospero 呼風喚雨 (hu1 feng1 huan4 yu43 = call-winds-beckon-rains = raised tempest). Party-goers wear 女巫 (nü3 wu1 = female-witch) costume on night of Halloween (= Hallows’ Eve), i.e., eve before 萬聖節 (wan4 sheng4 jie2 = ten-thousand-saints-festival = All Saints Day).

by Diana Yue