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 witches

魔 (radical 鬼 gui3, ghost) means 惡魔 (e4 mo2 = fierce-demon = evil spirit/person). 妖魔鬼怪 (yao1 mo2 gui3 guai4 = demon-devil-ghost-monster) collectively means evil powers. 驅魔人 (qü1 mo2 ren2 = expel-demons-person = exorcist) fights 魔鬼 (mo2 gui3 = demon-ghost = the Devil, devils).

變魔術 (bian4 mo2 shu4 = change/transform-demon/magic-method/power) = play magic tricks. Patients fear 病魔 (bing4 mo2 = sickness-demon = long/vicious illness). Women fear 色魔 (se1 mo2 = color/women-demon = molesters/rapist-killers).

群魔亂舞 (qün2 mo2 luan4 wu3 = mob-demons-disorderly-dance) describes evil/lawless powers flexing muscles. Orthodox believers reject 邪魔外道 (xie2 mo2 wai4 dao4 = evil-devils-outside-ways = heresy/heretics). Sage says: 魔由心生 (mo2 you2 xin1 sheng1 = demon/evil-from heart-rise = imagination/paranoia breeds fear/evil).

by Diana Yue