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 doors

Putonghua pronunciation: men2
Cantonese pronunciation: moon4
Meanings: door, gate, arch, branch, division

Ideogram 門 shows left-right symmetrical door-panels. Buildings’ occupants 進門 (jin4 men2 = enter-door-mouth) = enter), 出門 (chu1 men2 = exit-door = exit). Graft-payers 走後門 (zou3 hou4 men2 = walk-back-door = use bribes/guanxi to get things done).

Kungfu has many 門派 (men2 pai4 = door-branch = schools). Beginners start with 入門 (ru4 men2 = enter-door = primary level). 門徒 (men2 tu2 = school-disciple) = student/disciple.

門 also means traditional-style city gates/arches: Beijing’s 天安門 (tian1 an1 men2 = sky-tranquil-gate = Gate of Heavenly Peace), Paris’ 凱旋門 (kai3 xuan2 men2 = victory-return-gate = Arch of Triumph). 《羅生門》 (luo2 sheng1 men2, transliteration of title of Ryunosuke Akutagawa’s novella Rashomon), means an event clouded in different contradictory, audience-baffling accounts.

by Diana Yue