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 acting

Putonghua pronunciation: xi4
Cantonese pronunciation: hei3
Meanings: frivolity, play, drama, acting

戧 = play/frivolity. 遊戧 (you2 xi4 = roam-play = game), 戧言 (xi4 yan2 = play/frivolous-words = joke), 戧法 (xi4 fa3 = play-methods = magic tricks). Kids 戧弄 (xi4 nong4 = play-meddle-with = fool) teacher.

Chinese 戧劇 (xi4 ju2 = play-drama = drama) is 戧曲 (xi4 qu3 = drama-songs). 戧子 (xi4 zi3 = play-person = actor/actress) 做 戧 (zuo4 xi4 = make-drama = act), 唱戧 (chang4 xi4 = sing-drama = perform in operas).

Chinese saying “人生如戧” (ren2 sheng1 ru2 xi4 = people’s-life-resemble-drama = life resembles drama) echoes 莎士比亞 (sha1 shi4 bi3 ya4 = “Shakespeare”-transliterated)’s line “All the world’s a stage” (= 世界像戧台 shi4 jie4 xiang4 wu3 tai2 = world-territory-resemble-dance-stage).

by Diana Yue