Character Builder

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 \ 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

對 (dui4)
Cantonese pronunciation: dui3
Meanings: pair, twos, couple, facing

對 = 雙 (shuang4, couple/pair): 對稱 (dui4 cheng4 = pair-balance = symmetrical), 一雙筷子 (yi4 shuang1 kuai4 zi0 = a-pair-chopsticks), 一對門 (yi4 dui4 men2 = a-pair-doors with left-right panels). 門神 (men2 shen2 = door-gods’ pictures) decorate door-panels. 對聯 (dui4 lian2 = pair-link = vertically-hung descriptive couplets) decorate door’s left-and-right.

Singles seek 對象 (dui4 xiang4 = pair-face-image = object to woo/marry). 一對璧人 (yi4 dui4 bi3 ren2 = one-pair-jade-person) describes well-matched wedding couple.

對面 (dui4 mian4 = opposite-face) = opposite/facing. 對方 (dui4 fang1 = opposite-direction) = other-side/party. In negotiations, 對手 (dui4 shou3 = opposite-hand = rival parties) should 對話 (dui4 hua4 = face/interact-talk = dialogue), not 對 罵 (dui4 ma4 = face/interact-rebuke = bad-mouth each other).

by Diana Yue