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 the face

臉 (lián3)
Cantonese pronunciation: lim5
Meanings: face

In Chinese, ‘face’ can mean many things. 面孔 (miàn4 kǒng3 = face-hole/aperture) = face: kid’s 蘋果臉 (píng2 guǒ3 lián3 = apple-fruit-face = apple-red face), girl’s 瓜子臉 (guā1 zǐ0 lián3 = melon-seed-face = heart-shaped face). 臉紅 (lián3 hóng2 = face-red = blushing) reflects embarrassment/anger, 臉青 (lián3 qīng1 = face-turn-blue-green) reflects fear.

Snobs 愛面子 (ài4 miàn4 zi0 = love-face-diminutive = want face/respectability), hate 丟臉 (diū4 lián3 = drop/losing-face). 臉皮厚 (lián3 pí2 hòu4 = face-skin-thick) means unabashed/unashamed, 不要臉 (bù4 yào4 lián3 = no-want-face) means acting shamelessly. 反臉 (fǎn2 lián3 = overturn-face) describes friends/partners quarrelling, breaking up.

臉譜 (lián3 pǔ3 = face-drawings) are Chinese opera face-masks. Sichuan opera-singers perform 變臉 (biàn4 lián3 = change-face = changing face-masks at lightning speed).

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