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 right and wrong

**錯**

Putonghua pronunciation: cuo4
Cantonese pronunciation: choh3
Meanings: wrong

錯誤 (cuo4 wu4 = wrong/error-mistake/delay): 錯覺 (cuo4 jue2 = mistaken-feeling = false impression), 錯亂 (cuo4 luan4 = wrong-disorganized = deranged), 對錯 (dui4 cuo4 = right-or-wrong intellectual/moral judgment). Late-comer 錯過 (cuo4 guo4 = wrong-pass = misses) the show.

做錯事 (zuo4 cuo4 shi4 = do-wrong-act/event) = did something wrong. 殺錯人 (sha1 cuo4 ren1 = kill-wrong-person) = killed the wrong guy. To 認錯 (ren4 cuo4 = confess/admit-mistake = apologize), we say “我錯了!” (wo3 cuo4 le0 = I-err-ed) = “I was wrong!”

鑄成大錯 (zhu4 cheng2 da4 cuo4 = smelt/forge-become-big-wrong) = committed big/incorrigible mistake. However, clever strategist 將錯就錯 (jiang1 cuo4 jiu4 cuo4 = use-mistake-oblige-mistake = flexibly links wrong move to new move).

by Diana Yue