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 World Expo

観
Putonghua pronunciation: guan1
Cantonese pronunciation: goon1
Meanings: watch, view

Verb 観 has radical 見 (jian4, see). 觀察 (guan1 cha2 = watch-notice) = observe. 觀光 (guan1 guang1 = see-light) = tour/see places. Astrologers 觀星 (guan1 xing1 = watch-star = star-gaze). 觀眾 (guan1 zhong4 = watch-crowd = audience) 觀賞 (guan1 shang3 = watch-appreciate) movie.

Noun 觀 = view/scope: 微觀 (wei1 guan1 = micro-scopic), 宏觀 (hong2 guan1 = macro-scopic). Designers make clothes/decors 美觀 (mei3 guan1 = beautiful-view = visually appealing/beautiful). 洋洋大観 (yang2 yang2 da4 guan1 = grand-flowing-big-view) describes Expo's enormous range/array of exhibits. Ignorant/parochial/unenlightened people 坐井観天 (zuo4 jing3 guan1 tian1 = sit-in-well-watch-sky = have narrow outlooks). 旁観者清 (pang2 guan1 zhe3 qing1 = aside-watch-er-clear) means detached onlooker can see/assess situation more clearly than those involved.

by Diana Yue