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 missing persons

Putonghua pronunciation: an4
Cantonese pronunciation: ngon6
Meanings: table, file, case

案 originally means table. 拍案 (pái an4 = bang-on-table) is gesture indicating passion/anger. Infuriated person 拍案而起 (pái an4 er2 qǐ3 = bangs-on-table–and–springs-up-to shout/act). Clever story-plot makes reader 拍案叫絕 (pái an4 jiāo4 jùe2 = bang-on-desk-exclaim–“Absolutely-wonderful!”)

檔案 (dāng4 an4 = slot-table) = record/file. Police handle 案件 (an4 jían4 = record/file-piece = 案子 an4 zi0 = case-unit = filed cases). Criminal 做案 (zuò an4 an4 = make-case = commits crime). Police立案 (li4 an4 = establish/open-case), 查案 (chá an4 an4 = investigate-case), 破案 (pò an4 an4 = crack-case), 結案 (jié an4 an4 = closes-case).

Missing persons 人間蒸發 (rén jiān2 jiǎn1 jíng1 fa1 = people-region–steam–swell = evaporate/vanish from world), leaving 懸案 (xuān2 an4 = suspended/unsolved-cases).

by Diana Yue