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 IDs

簽 签 (radical 竹 zhu2, bamboo) = thin bamboo/wooden/plastic slip: 牙簽 (ya2 qian1 = tooth-slice = toothpick), 書簽 (shu1 qian1 = bookmark). 標簽 (biao1 qian1 = mark-slip) = label. Temple worshippers 求簽 (qiu2 qian1 = beg-bamboo-slip = pick divination slip for oracle’s fortune forecast).

簽字 (qian1 zi4 = sign-word) = indicate consent with signature or drawn sign. 簽約 (qian1 yue4 = signing-contract) requires parties’ 親筆簽名 (qin1 bi3 qian1 ming2 = self/own-pen-sign-name = own/real signature). Court approves will carrying deceased’s 簽名式 (qian1 ming2 shi1 = sign-name- style = signature style). Courier delivery requires 簽收 (qian1 shou1 = sign-receive = signature acknowledging receipt).

Embassy 簽發 (qian1 fa1 = signs-and-issues) 簽證 (qian1 zheng4 = sign-evidence = entry visa/permit) to applicant.

by Diana Yue