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

查
Putonghua pronunciation: cha2
Cantonese pronunciation: cha4
Meanings: search, check, examine, inspect, investigate

查 = search/check. 查問 (cha2 wen4 = check-question) = ask/cross-examine. 查閱 (cha2 yue4 = check-read) = search books/records. 巡查 (xun2 cha2 = tour-check) = do inspection-rounds. 調查 (dio4 cha2 = collect/select-check) = investigate. 查清楚 (cha2 qing1 chu3 = check-clean-clear) = obtain accurate findings.

Accountant 查賬 (cha2 zhang4 = examine/vet-accounts). Patient needs 身體檢查 (shen1 ti3 jian3 cha2 = body-pick-up-check = physical check-up). Boss orders employees to查找不足 (cha2 zhaoo3 bu4 zu2 = check-search-not-enough = reflect on mistakes/inadequacies).

Police 明查暗訪 (ming2 cha2 an4 fang3 = bright-check-dark-visit = conduct open/secret searches), 查出 (cha2 chu1 = check-out = successfully find) kidnapped children’s whereabouts, 查不出 (cha21 bu4 chu1 = check-not-out = cannot find/determine) kidnapper’s identity.

by Diana Yue