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.

Putonghua pronunciation: fang2
Cantonese pronunciation: fong4

Meaning: house, apartment, flat, room, building, branch of family

房 (radical 戶 hu4, door/household) = 房子 (fang2 zi0 = house-diminutive = house/building), 房屋 (fang2 wu1 = house-with-rooms), 房間 (fang2 jian1 = house-partition) = room. 長房 (zhang3 fang2 = eldest’s-rooms) means eldest son’s family-line.

書房 (shu1 fang2 = books-room) = private study/library. 藥房 (yao4 fang2 = medicine-room) = apothecary/drugstore. However, 心房 (xin1 fang2 = heart-room) means depths of someone’s heart.