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 funerals

祭
Putonghua pronunciation: ji4
Cantonese pronunciation: jail1
Meaning: offer animal sacrifice, offering, libations, sacrificial/funeral ceremony

Pictogram 祭 (meat on left, hand on right, altar-table in middle) means 献祭 (xian4 ji4 = offer-sacrifices), 祭奠 (ji4 dian4 = offer-sacrifices-and-wine), 祭祀 (ji4 si4 = offer-sacrifices-in-worship), 古祭 (ji4 gui3 shen2 = sacrifice-to-ghosts-deities), 祭祖 (ji4 zu3 = sacrifice-to-ancestors). Leading army on military expedition, general executes traitor to 祭旗 (ji4 qi2 = sacrifice-to-army-flag = assert military authority).

大祭司 (da4 ji4 si4 = big-sacrificial-ceremonies-master = high priest) performs 祭禮 (ji4 li3 = sacrificial-ceremony). 祭品 (ji4 pin3 = sacrificed-items) include 活祭 (huo2 ji4 = live-sacrifices). Many Chinese ancient bronzes are 祭器 (ji4 qi4 = sacrificial-vessels). At deceased founding-father's 公祭 (gong1 ji4 = public-funeral/memorial-ceremony), prime-minister reads 祭文 (ji4 wen2 = mourning/elegant-address).