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.

This week: Words about music

琴

Pronunciation: qin (Putonghua, 2nd tone), kam (Cantonese 4th tone)
Basic meaning: stringed or piped musical instrument

Traditionally, connoisseurship in 琴, 棋 (qi =围棋 wei qi = Go), 書 (shu = calligraphy), 畫 (hua = painting) symbolize good upbringing.

“Qualifier + 琴” denote various musical instruments: 古琴 (gu qin = ancient 琴, seven-stringed zither); 鋼琴 (gang qin = steel 琴 = piano); 小提琴 (xiao ti qin = small-pickup 琴 = violin); 胡琴 (hu qin = 琴 from Hu, region northwest of China, stringed instrument played with bow). The Tibetan 六弦琴 (liu xian qin = six-strings 琴) is strummed like the 吉他 (ji ta = “guitar” transliterated).

琴譜 (qin pu) means 琴 notation scores. 對牛彈琴 (dui niu tan qin = facing bull/cow strum 琴) means casting pearls before swine.

by Diana Yue