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 foreign currencies

Putonghua pronunciation: wai4
Cantonese pronunciation: ngoi6
Meanings: outside, external, foreign

中 (zhong1, centre/internal) also means 中國 (Zhong1 Guo2 = Middle-kingdom = China). 外 (wai4, external) also means 外國 (wai4 guo2 = foreign-countries): 外交 (wai4 jiao1 = foreign-make-friends = foreign diplomacy), 外幣 (wai4 bi4 = foreign-currencies).

外商 (wai4 shang1 = foreign-merchants/businesses) bring 外資 (wai4 zii1 = foreign-capital) into China through 中外合資 (Zhong1 wai4 he2 zii1 = China-foreign-unite-capital = joint-investment of Chinese and foreign capital).

外匯 (wai4 hui4 = foreign-transfer) = foreign exchange (Forex/FX). Countries have 外匯儲備 (wai4 hui4 chu3 bei4 = foreign-exchange-save-prepare = Forex reserves) in 美元 (Mei3 yuan2 = American-dollars), 黃金 (huang2 jin1 = yellow-gold = gold). Rich people have 海外資產 (hai3 wai4 zii1 chan3 = seas-outside-capital-property = overseas assets).

by Diana Yue