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 bureaucrats

Pronunciation: guan (Putonghua, 3rd tone), goon (Cantonese, 2nd tone)

Basic meaning: pipe, manage, control

Noun 管 means pipe/reed-instrument.


“Mr X has 氣管炎 (qi guan yan = air~tube~affection = bronchitis)” may mean the man’s 妻管嚴 (qi guan yan = wife-control-strict = hen-pecked”), with puns on 氣-4th-tone&妻-1st-tone, 管&管-3rd-tone, 炎&嚴-2nd-tone.

by Diana Yue