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

幣
Putonghua pronunciation: bi4
Cantonese pronunciation: bai6
Meanings: currency


外幣 (wai4 bi4 = foreign-currency) = 外匯 (wai4 hui4 = foreign-exchange): 美元 (Mei3 yuan = American-dollar), 日元 (Ri4 yuan = Japanese-yen), 歐羅 (Ou1 Luo2 = “Euro”-transliterated). 外匯買賣 (wai4 hui4 mai3 mai4 = foreign-exchange-buy-sell = Forex trading) has risks. Collectors prefer keeping 金幣 (jin1 bi4 = gold-coins).

China’s 人民幣 (ren2 min2 bi4 = person-people-currency = Renminbi/RMB/CNY) is not 自由浮動 (zi4 you2 fu2 dong4 = self-permitted-float-move = free-floating), hence non-convertable.

by Diana Yue