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:

1\(^{st}\) tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged
2\(^{nd}\) tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high
3\(^{rd}\) tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high
4\(^{th}\) 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 new People's Congress**

**掌**

Putonghua pronunciation: zhang3
Cantonese pronunciation: jeung2
Meanings: palm of hand, paw, grasp, manage, control

掌 (radical 手 shou3, hand) means person’s 手掌 (shou3 zhang3 = hand’s-palm) or animal’s 前掌 (qian2 zhang3 = front-paw), 後掌 (hou4 zhang3 = rear-paw). 拍掌 (pai1 zhang3 = clapping- hands) creates 掌聲 (zhang3 sheng1 = hands-sound = clapping applause).

Male-chauvinist gives wife 巴掌 (yi1 ba1 zhang3 = one-slab-palm = hard slap) on face. Idiom 魚與熊掌 (yi2 yu3 xiong2 zhang3 = fish-and-bear’s-paw, both delicious) describes hesitancy/dilemma of someone who can only pick one of two good things.

掌櫃 (zhang3 gui4 = control-shelves/drawers = proprietor/manager) 掌管 (zhang3 guan3 = controls-manages) business’s operations. President 掌政 (zhang3 qun2 = controls-power), 掌政 (zhang3 zheng4 = directs-administration). General 掌軍 (zhang3 jun1 = leads-military), 掌握 (zhang3 wo1 = controls-holds) army secrets.

by Diana Yue