Character Builder

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 choirs

指

Putonghua pronunciation: zhi3
Cantonese pronunciation: ji2
Meanings: finger, point, command

指 (radical 手 = hand shou3, hand) means 手指 (shou3 zhi3 = hand-point = finger). 食指 (shi2 zhi3 = eat-finger) = index finger. 恆生指數 (Heng2 Sheng1 zhi3 shu4 = Hang-Seng-index-number) = HKSE’s Hang Seng Index. 指南 (zhi3 nan2 = point-south) means guide/manual pamphlet.

Professor 指導 (zhi3 dao3 = point-guide = supervises) students, 指出 (zhi3 chu1 = points-out) mistakes, 指責 (zhi3 ze2 = point-rebuke = attacks/condemns) plagiarism. Hegemonic power’s 指點 (zhi3 zhi3 dian3 dian3 = point-point-dot-dot = criticism/accusation/finger-pointing) 劍指 (jian4 zhi3 = sword-point = targets/menaces) neighboring state.

總指揮 (zhong3 zhi3 hui1 = main-point-wave = commander-in-chief. Orchestra/choir’s 指揮 (zhi3 hui1 = point-wave = conductor) uses 指揮棒 (zhi3 hui1 bang4 = point-wave-stick/rod = baton).

by Diana Yue