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 San Francisco

掘
Putonghua pronunciation: jüe2
Cantonese pronunciation: gwat6
Meaning: dig, excavate

掘 (radical 手 = hand) = dig: 掘鑿 (jüe2 zao3 = dig-cut/chisel into rock), 掘掘 (wa1 jüe2 = scrape-dig), 掘土 (jüe2 tu3 = dig-into-earth). Miners 掘洞 (jüe2 dong4 = dig-holes) to 掘煤 (jüe2 mei2 = dig-for-coal).

Archaeologists 掘墓 (jüe2 mu4 = dig-open-tombs = excavate tombs), 掘出 (jüe2 chu1 = dig-out) mummy. Thieves 掘走 (jüe2 zou3 = dig-away) mural paintings from Dunhuang caves. Headhunter 掘發 (fa1 jüe2 = discover-dig = discovers) new talent. 掘渴 (jüe2 ke3 jüe2 jing3 = approaching-thirst-dig-well) means belated attempt at last-minute solution.

In California Gold Rush (1848-55) people 掘金 (jüe2 jin1 = dug-for-gold). 掘金娘子 (jüe2 jin1 niang2 zi0 = dig-gold-woman-diminutive) = pretty girls making bucks off rich men.

by Diana Yue