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 \ 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 O.

This week: Words about San Francisco

金
Putonghua pronunciation: jin1
Cantonese pronunciation: gam1
Meaning: gold, metal, money

Radical 金 indicates 金屬 (jin1 shu2 = gold-kind = metals): 銀 (yin2, silver), 銅 (tong2, copper), 鐵 (tie3, iron) or metalware-related actions: 鑿 (zao2, chisel), 鑛 (zhuan4, screw).

金錢 (jin1 qian2 = gold-coin/money) means money. 美金 (Mei3 jin1 = American-gold/money) = US dollars. 金礦 (jin1 kuang4 = gold-mines) produce 黃金 (huang2 jin1 = yellow-gold = gold).

金條 (jin1 tiao2 = gold-bars) are 質金 (shi2 jin1 = solid-gold).
Blondes have 金髮 (jin1 fa3 = golden-hair). 拜金 (bai4 jin1 = worship-gold) means materialism/mammonism.

三藩市 (San1 Fan1 Shi4, “San Francisco”-transliterated)’s old name is 舊金山 (Jiu4 Jin1 Shan1 = literally “old-gold-mountain”).
“金山伯” (jin1 Shan1 bo2 = gold-mountain-uncles) means America’s earlier generations of Chinese male migrant-workers.

by Diana Yue