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 presidential elections

票 (radical 示 shi4, show/indicate) means slip/ticket/writ: 郵票 (you2 piao4 = postal-stamp), 戲票 (xi4 piao4 = movie-ticket), 票根 (piao4 gen1 = ticket-root) = ticket stub. PRC once used 糧票 (liang2 piao4 = grains/food-stamps/coupons).

匯票 (hui4 piao4 = transfer-slip) = bank draft. 告票 (gao4 piao4 = prosecute-ticket) = court’s summons. Voters have 選票 (xuan3 piao4 = election-votes), want 一人一票 (yi1 ren2 yi1 piao4 = one-person-one-vote).

Before 投票日 (tou2 piao4 ri4 = cast-votes-day = election day), candidates 拉票 (la1 piao4 = pull/drag-votes = rally votes). Slandered candidate 失票 (shi1 piao4 = lose-votes). Candidate supported by 鐵票 (tie3 piao4 = iron/unswerving-votes) 高票當選 (gao1 piao4 dang1 xuan3 = high/big-number-votes-get-elected = wins with massive votes).

by Diana Yue