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 stockmarket gambling

押

Putonghua pronunciation: ya1
Cantonese pronunciation: aat3
Meanings: sign, place in custody, escort, pledge, mortgage, place bet, atake

押 (radical 手 shou3, hand) = sign: 畫押 (hua4 ya1 = inscribe-sign/signature as pledge). Guards 押運 (ya1 yun4 = securely-escort/trasport) prisoner/goods.

Cash-shy gambler pawns valuables at 押店 (ya1 dian4 = pledge-guaranty-shop = 當舖 dang4 pu4 = pawn-shop). Mortgagor 抵押 (di3 ya1 = substitute-pledge = mortgages) apartment to bank as 抵押品 (di3 ya1 pin3 = substitute-pledge-thing = guaranty).

Roulette-players 押注 (ya1 zhu4 = pledge-bet) = place stakes: 押中 (ya1 zhong4 = place-hit-mark = hit the right number), 押錯 (ya1 cuo4 = place-wrong = miss). Desperate speculator makes one last fling, 押上 (ya1 shang4 = pledge-up = places as stake) all remaining assets. Faust 押 (his soul) 給 (ya1 .. gei3 = pawns-his-soul-to) the Devil.

by Diana Yue