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

閣
Putonghua pronunciation: ge2
Cantonese pronunciation: gok3
Meanings: loft, cabinet, threshold, boudoir, pavilion

閣 (radical 門 men2, door) means閣樓 (ge2 lou2 = raised-tower/storey = loft). 藏書閣 (cang2 jing1 ge2 = hide/store-sutras/scriptures=loft) = monastery-library. 租之高閣 (shu4 zhi1 gao1 ge2 = bind/leave-it-high-loft) = idea/plan stalled.

Girl inhabiting 闔閤 (gui1 ge2 = lady's-boudoir) 出閣 (chu1 ge2 = exit-boudoir = gets married). 內閣 (nei4 ge2 = inside-rooms, cabinet ministers’ chambers) = cabinet. Prime Minister 組閣 (zu3 ge2 = forms-cabinet). Ministers 入閣 (ru4 ge2 = enter/join-cabinet), become 閣員 (ge2 yuan2 = cabinet members).

影子內閣 (ying3 zi0 nei4 ge2 = shadow-diminutive-cabinet) = opposition's shadow cabinet. 走馬燈內閣 (zou3 ma3 deng1 nei4 ge2 = galloping-horse-lantern-cabinet) means shaky cabinet repeatedly changing hands, spinning around non-stop like a Chinese hot-air rotating lantern.

by Diana Yue