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 mahjong

家
Putonghua pronunciation: jia1
Cantonese pronunciation: ga1
Meanings: family, home, group, player, expert

Ideogram 家 (家, roof sheltering 筑 shi3, pig) means home/family/activity-base/expert. 持家 (chi2 jia1 = hold/handle-home) = keep house. 酒家 (jiu3 jia1 = wine-house) = restaurant. 名家 (ming2 jia1 = famous-practitioner) = expert/master. In gambling, 莊家 (zhuang1 jia1 = manor-seat-player) means the banker.

麻將 (ma2 jiang4 = mahjong) has 四家 (si4 jia1 = four-players). Players stack 麻將牌 (ma2 jiang4 pai2 = mahjong-tiles) into four rows forming square, each starts with 13-tile hand. 摸牌 (mo1 pai2 = touch/take-a-tile), 打牌 (da3 pai2 = hit/eject-another-tile), watch上家 (shang4 jia1 = upper-hand-player), 下家 (xia4 jia1 = lower-hand-player), 對家 (dui4 jia1 = opposition-player) change tiles.

旺家 (wang4 jia1 = roaring-flame/prosperous-player) means lucky guy consistently getting good hands and winning.

by Diana Yue