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 walls

牆
Putonghua pronunciation: qiang 2
Cantonese pronunciation: cheung 4
Meanings: wall

牆壁 (qiang2 bi4 = wall-wall) enclose houses/gardens/fortresses: 磚牆 (zhuan1 qiang2 = brick-walls), 石牆 (shi2 qiang2 = stone-walls). Soldiers guard 城牆 (cheng2 qiang2 = city-wall), 護城河 (hu4 cheng2 he2 = protect-city-river = moat). 紅牆綠瓦 (hong2 qiang2 lu4 wa3 = red-walls-green-roof-tiles) describes Chinese traditional architecture.

Jerusalem’s 哭牆 (ku1 qiang2 = cry-wall) = Wailing Wall. 柏林圍牆 (bo2 lin2 wei2 qiang2 = “Berlin”-transliterated-enclose-wall) = the Berlin Wall. 騎牌派 (qi2 qiang2 pai4 = climb-wall-faction) describes wavering/opportunistic person.

Woman having extra-marital affair is 紅杏出牆 (hong2 xing4 chu1 qiang2 = red-apricot-out-wall = sprig of red apricot blossoms growing over wall). “隔牆有耳!” (ge2 qiang2 you2 er3 = separated-wall-has-ears) = “Someone’s eavesdropping next door!”

by Diana Yue