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 pipe organs

琴

Putonghua pronunciation: qin2
Cantonese pronunciation: kam4
Meanings: qin, lute, zither, lyre, keyboard or string musical instrument

Ideogram 琴 has radical 璧 (jüe2 = two jade-pieces jingling). 古琴 (gu3 qin2 = ancient-zither = Chinese qin) is strummed. 胡琴 (hu2 qin2 = northwestern Hu-region’s-stringed-instrument) is played with bow. Elegant people practice 琴棋書畫 (qin2 qi2 shu1 hua4 = qin, chess/Go, calligraphy, painting).

鋼琴 (gang1 qin2 = steel-琴) = piano. 提琴 (ti2 qin2 = pickup/hold~琴) = violin/viola/cello/double-bass. 管風琴 (guan3 feng1 qin2 = pipe~wind~琴) = pipe organ.

琴’s meaning varies in context: 琴鍵 (qin2 jian4 = piano/organ keys), 琴弦 (qin2 xian2 = violin/guitar-strings), 琴譜 (qin2 pu3 = instrumental-score). 琴聲美妙 (qin2 sheng1 mei3 miao4 = 琴~sound~beautiful~wonderful) = lovely playing. 琴鳥 (qin2 niao3 = lyre~bird) has beautiful plumage.

by Diana Yue