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 ECFA (Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement)

簽 (radical 竹 zhu2, bamboo)
Putonghua pronunciation: qian1
Cantonese pronunciation: chim1
Meanings: bamboo stick, signal, label, sign

簽 = bamboo strip. Temple worshipper 求簽 (qi2 qian1 = beg/pick-foretunetelling-strip) which carries oracle’s prediction/guidance: 上簽 (shang4 qian1 = top-strip) predicts luck, 下簽 (xia4 qian1 = bottom-strip) predicts misfortune.

書簽 (shu1 qian1 = book~strip) = bookmark. 標簽 (biao1 qian1 = label~strip) = mark with label. Verb 簽名 (qian1 ming2 = mark/label~name) = sign one’s name. Noun 簽名式 (qian2 ming2 shi1 = sign~name~style) = signature. Business partners 簽約 (qian1 yue4 = sign~contract). Embassy 簽發 (qian1 fa1 = signs/stamps~releases) passports visas. 冒簽 (mao4 qian1 = falsely-assume~sign = forging someone’s signature) is a crime.

After 簽署 (qian1 shu3 = sign~put-down-name = signing) and 確認 (que4 ren4 = sure-recognize = ratification), ECFA 生效 (sheng1 xiao4 = born-effect = became valid/effective).

by Diana Yue