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 stupid search

劍
Cantonese pronunciation: gim3
Meanings: sword, dagger

劍 has radical 刂 (= 刀 dao1, knife). 劍客 (jian4 ke4 = sword-guest = 剣俠 jian4 xia2 = sword-knight-errant = swordsmen) wield 寶劍 (bao3 jian4 = valuable/mighty-sword), 比劍 (bi3 jian4 = contest-sword = fight duel/swordfight). 劍術 (jian4 shu4 = sword-method) = swordsmanship. 劍膽琴心 (jian4 dan3 qin2 xin1 = sword-gall-bladder-lute-heart) describes valiant hero with tender feelings.

亮劍 (liang4 jian4 = bright/show-sword) means draw sword or exhibit military strength. 劍拔弩張 (jian4 ba2 nu3 zhang1 = sword-drawn-crossbow-stretched) describes antagonists’ military clash gestures.

Idiom 刻舟求劍 (ke4 zhou1 qiu2 jian4 = engrave-boat-seek-sword) = using stupid rationale to pursue goal: Man’s sword fell into river, he carved mark on boat, rowed back to shore and searched for sword there.

by Diana Yue