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 the five elements

金
Putonghua pronunciation: jin1
Cantonese pronunciation: gam1
Meanings: metal

Radical 金 indicates nature/use of 金属 (jin1 shu2 = gold-kind = metals): 銀 (yin2, silver), 鋼 (gang1, steel), 鑿 (zao2, hammer), 鑰 (zhuan4, screw). 金生水 (jin1 sheng1 shui3 = metal-generate/ trap/contain-water), 金剋木 (jin1 ke4 mu4 = metal-overcomes/ splits-wood), demonstrate 五行 (wu3 xing2 = five-elements) principles.


黑金 (hei1 jin1 = black-gold) means secretly circulated gangsters’ money (not petroleum, the English meaning). 拜金主義 (bai4 jin1 zhu3 yi4 = worship-gold-main-principle) = materialism/mammonism.

by Diana Yue