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.

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This week: Words about old family money

Putonghua pronunciation: ji1
Cantonese pronunciation: gei1
Meanings: base, foundation

基 (radical 土 tu3, earth) depicts base made of rammed earth. 根基 (gen1 ji1 = roots-base) = 基礎 (ji1 chu3 = base-column’s-stone-base) = base. 基本 (ji1 ben3 = base-origin) = basic/fundamental. 地基 (di4 ji1 = earth-land-base) = building’s foundation. 基本建設 (ji1 ben3 jian4 she4 = fundamental-basic-erect-facilities) = infrastructures.

基地 (ji1 di4 = base-earth/area) = organization/activities’ home-base. 基地組織 (ji1 di4 zu3 zhi2 = base-area-form-knit = base organization = “The Base”) is Al-Qaeda’s Chinese translation. 基因 (ji1 yin1 = base-factor) = “gene”s-transliterated.

Self-made man rose from 基層 (ji1 ceng2 = basic-layer = poor classes), built 基業 (ji1 ye4 = base-achievement = enterprise), donated to 慈善基金 (ci2 shan4 ji1 jin1 = loving-good-base-gold/money = charity funds).

by Diana Yue