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 IDs

Putonghua pronunciation: ben3
Cantonese pronunciation: boon2
Meanings: original, book, copy

本 (radical 木 mu4, wood/tree + horizontal stroke at base) means roots/basic/essential/original, opposite of 未 (mo4, tip/end/inessential). 根本 (gen4 ben3 = roots-basic) = 基本 (ji1 ben3 = foundation-basic) = fundamental/fundamentally. 我自 (wo3 ben3 ren2 = I/original-person) = 我自 (wo3 ben3 shen1 = I-original-body) have reflexive/emphatic meaning: myself.


Person having dual nationality holds 兩本護照 (liang3 ben3 hu4 zha4 = two-book-protection-proof-document = two passports).

by Diana Yue