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 about orchestras

指 (radical 手 = hand shou3 = hand)
Putonghua pronunciation: zhi3
Cantonese pronunciation: ji2
Meanings: finger, point, direct, order, conduct

指 = finger: 拇指 (mu3 zhi3 = thumb), 食指 (shi2 zhi3 = eat-finger = second finger), 中指 (zhong1 zhi3 = middle-finger), 無名指 (wu2 ming2 zhi3 = no-name-finger = fourth finger), 小指 (xiao3 zhi3 = small-finger = pinkie).

Chinese idiom “Buddha’s 五指山” (wu3 zhi3 shan1 = five-fingers-mountain) means highest authority’s all-over control confining all devils/subjects’ movements.

Kungfu movie has 武術指導 (wu3 shu4 zhi2 dao3 = martial-arts-director). 樂團指揮 (yue4 tuan2 zhi3 hui1 = music-group-point-wave = orchestral conductor) waves 指揮棒 (zhi3 hui1 bang4 = point-wave-stick = baton), gives 指示 (zhi3 shi4 = point-show = orders/instructions), 指定 (zhi3 ding4 = point-fix = appoints) soloists, 指點 (zhi2 dian3 = point-dot = teaches/advises) musicians’ playing.

by Diana Yue