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

護 (radical言 yan2, speech/word) means 保護 (bao3 hu4 = preserve/guard-protect), 愛護 (ai4 hu4 = love/care-for-protect). 護士 (hu4 shi4 = protect-person) = nurse, 護衛 (hu4 wei4 = protect-defend) = guard. Minor has 監護人 (jian1 hu4 ren2 = guard-protect-person = guardian). 護城河 (hu4 cheng2 he3 = protect-city/castle-river = moat) surrounds castle.


護照 (hu4 zhao4 = protection-proof-document = passport) is refugee’s 護身符 (hu4 shen2 fu2 = protect-body-charm = talisman) when seeking 政治庇護 (zheng4 zhi4 fu2 hu4 = politics-rule-blessing-protection = political asylum).