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 World Expo

博
Putonghua pronunciation: bo2
Cantonese pronunciation: bok3
Meanings: wide, broad


地大物博 (di4 da4 wu4 bo2 = land-big-materials/objects-broad) describes big region/country rich in flora/fauna/resources. 上海 (Shang4 Hai3 = Shanghai) held 2010 世界博覽會 (shi4 jie4 bo2 lan3 hui4 = world-border-wide-see-meet/assembly = World Exposition).

博大精深 (bo2 da4 jing1 shen1 = broad-big/grand-fine/sharp-deep/penetrating) describes immensely-rich cultures/teachings. Idealist preaches 博愛 (bo2 ai4 = wide-love = universal/unconditioned benevolence).

by Diana Yue