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 autumn

Putonghua pronunciation: cheng2
Cantonese pronunciation: sing4
Meanings: fulfill, achieve, complete, succeed, harvest

成 means successful/success. Farmers watch crops 成長 (cheng2 zhang3 = mature-grow), await autumn’s 收成 (shou1 cheng2 = collecting-harvest). Larva becomes 成蟲 (cheng2 chong2 = adult-insect). 成人 (cheng2 ren2 = adults) have 成熟 (cheng2 shou2 = fulfill-ripe = mature) views.


We say “成!” (xing2 = Yes, OK, agreed!) for agreement/approval, “不成!” = “不行!” (bu1 xing2 = “No!”) for objection/disapproval.

by Diana Yue