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 \ 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 One Belt One Road

Putonghua pronunciation: ta4, tuo4
Cantonese pronunciation: tok3
Meaning: rub and print, hew, open up, carve out, forge out, stretch, expand, reclaim

拓 (radical 手 = hand shou3, hand + 石 shi2, stone/rock) means hew/forge out. Chinese artisans 拓印 (ta4 yin4 = rub-print = make rubbings of) calligraphy carved on steles, produce 拓本 (ta4 ben3 = rubbed-printed-copy = rubbings).

開拓 (kai1 tuo4 = open-hew) = open up land/possibilities. Pioneers 拓荒 (tuo4 huang1 = open-up-wild/virgin-territory). Farmers 拓地 (tuo4 di4 = reclaim-land). Empire 開疆拓土 (kai1 jiang1 tuo4 tu3 = expands-territories-develops-land), send slaves/prisoners to 拓邊 (tuo4 bian1 = hew-fringe = develop border areas).

China launches 一带一路 (yil dai4 yil lu4 = One-Belt-One-Road) initiative to 拓寬視野 (tuo4 kuan1 shi4 ye3 = open-up-broad-see-field = expand vision/outlook), 拓展市場 (tuo4 zhan3 shi4 chang3 = open-up-expand-market-field = expand markets).

by Diana Yue