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 China's economic take-off

Putonghua pronunciation: jian4
Cantonese pronunciation: gin3
Meanings: build, construct, formulate, inaugurate, erect, establish

建 (radical 卜 lu4 = 立 lu4, law) originally meant formulate/establish legal code. 建立 (jian4 li4 = formulate-stand/erect = establish): counselor’s建議 (jian4 yi4 = formulate-discuss = suggestion/proposal), hero’s 建樹 (jian4 shu4 = establish-tree/erect = achievements).

In 1949 PRC 建國 (jian4 guo2 = build-nation = inaugurated new nation), 建都 (jian4 du1 = established-capital at) Beijing, 建軍 (jian4 jun1 = built-army). In 1979 中美建交 (Zhong1 Mei3 jian4 jiao1 = China-A“me”rica-transliterated-build-cross/friendship = China and the US established diplomatic relations).

建築 (jian4 zhu1 = build-construct) = construction/architecture. 基建 (ji1 jian4), short for 基本建設 (ji1 ben3 jian4 she4 = base-origin-build-facility), means infrastructures. Country’s economic base determines its 上層建築 (shang4 ceng2 jian4 zhu1 = upper-level-build-construct = superstructure/ ideology/culture.

by Diana Yue