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 residency

生
Putonghua pronunciation: sheng1
Cantonese pronunciation: saang1
Meanings: birth, give birth, father, life, lively, develop, raw

生 (picturing grass growing on land) means live/life: 出生 (chu1 sheng1 = out-born = is born), 生長 (sheng1 zhang3 = live-grow = grow), 生日 (sheng1 ri4 = birth-day).

WWII-survivor 一生吃苦 (yi1 sheng1 chi1 ku3 = one-life-eat-bitterness = had it hard his whole life), complains: “生不逢時!” (sheng1 bu4 feng2 shi2 = born-no-meet-time = “Born into the wrong era!”)

土生土長 (tu3 sheng1 tu3 zhang3 = earth/land-born-earth/land-grow) describes person born and raised indigenously. 謀生 (mou2 sheng1 = plan/seek-livehood) = work. 生兒育女 (sheng1 er2 yu4 nü3 = give-birth-son-raise-daughter) = have kids, raise family. Person who enjoys 生活 (sheng1 huo2 = born-live = living) appreciates meaning of 生命 (sheng1 ming4 = living-life = life).

by Diana Yue