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 high-speed trains

宏
Putonghua pronunciation: hong2
Cantonese pronunciation: wang4
Meanings: grand, magnificent, macroscopic

宏 = big/grand: 宏偉 (hong2 wei3 = great/majestic) stature, 寬宏 (kuan1 hong2 = spacious-large = magnanimous) spirit. 全國一盤棋 (quan2 guo2 yi1 pan2 qi2 = whole-nation-one-board/game-of-chess) describes 宏觀 (hong2 guan1 = grand-view = macroscopic), nation-wide manoeuvres.

Trains using 電 (dian4, electricity) generated by 煤 (mei2, coal), 風 (feng1, wind), 水 (shui3, water) are 節能 (jie2 neng2 = save-energy = energy-saving). China has 宏圖 (hong2 tu2 = grand-picture/vision/plan) to build 低碳 (di1 tan4 = low-carbon = low carbon-dioxide emission) railway network.

By 2020 China will have 四縱四橫 (si4 zong4 si4 heng2 = four-vertical-four-horizontal = four north-to-south, four east-to-west) high-speed 客運專線 (ke4 yun4 zhuang1 xian4 = guest-transport-exclusive-lines = passenger-dedicated railway lines) totalling 25,000 km.

by Diana Yue