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

造 (zao4)
Cantonese pronunciation: jo6
Meanings: arrive, achieve, construct, produce, create

造 = arrive/achieve: 造訪 (zao4 fang3 = arrive-visit = visit), 造成 (zao4 cheng2 = arrive-succeed = cause/achieve), 創造 (chuang4 zao4 = initiate-make = create). 造化 (zao4 hua4 = creation-transformation) means wonders of creation or person’s luck.

造 = make: 人造 (ren2 zao4 = man-make = artificial) = artificial silk. 偽造 (wei4 zao4 = false-make) = fake/fabrication/forgery.

Chinese economy experienced 改造 (gai3 zao4 = alter-make = reforms): 造林 (zao4 lin2 = make-forest = reforestation), 造船 (zao4 chuan2 = make-ship = shipbuilding), 造车 (zao4 che1 = make-car = car-manufacturing), 建造业 (jian4 zao4 ye4 = build-make-industry = building/construction).

Brands now boast 中國製造 (Zhong1 Guo2 zhi4 zao4 = China-produce-make = made in China).

by Diana Yue