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 promotion

升
Putonghua pronunciation: sheng1
Cantonese pronunciation: sing1
Meanings: measurement unit, rise, ascend, raise, promote

Noun 升 (radical 十 shi2, ten) is weight measure: 公升 (gong1 sheng1 = metric-litre). Verb 升 = 上升 (shang4 sheng1 = go-up-ascend). 升降機 (sheng1 jiang4 ji1 = go-up-go-down-machine) = lift/elevator. On Ascension Day Jesus升天 (sheng1 tian1 = rose-to-heaven). 升旗禮 (sheng1 qi2 li3 = raise-flag-ceremony) = flag-flying ceremony.

升級 (sheng1 ji2 = rise-grade) means student/employee's promotion to higher grade. Smart employee 連升兩級 (lian2 sheng1 liang3 ji2 = consecutively-rise-two-grades = gets two promotions in one breath).

Old-time Chinese bureaucrats want 升官發財 (sheng1 guan1 fa1 cai2 = rise-office-grow-money = promotion bringing big fortune). Hong Kong speculators want housing prices to 升高 (sheng1 gao1 = go-up), apartments to 升值 (sheng1 zhi2 = rise-in-value = appreciate).

by Diana Yue