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

富
Putonghua pronunciation: fu4
Cantonese pronunciation: foo3
Meanings: abundant, rich, become rich, wealth

Pictogram 富 shows roof under bulging house, means 富有 (fu4 you3 = rich-have = wealthy). Super-rich 富可敵國 (fu4 ke3 di2 guo2 = rich-can-enemy/rival-country = can rival small countries in wealth).

China wants to become 富強 (fu4 qiang2 = rich-strong) country, achieve小康 (xiao3 kang1 = little-healthy = relative abundance), minimize 貧富懸殊 (pin2 fu4 xuan2 shu1 = poor-rich-suspend-different = great gap between rich and poor). But 富二代 (fu4 er4 dai4 = rich-two/second-generation = sons/daughters of rich families) 炫富 (xuan2 fu4 = flare/unsafe-wealth), make public 仇富 (chou2 fu4 = hate-rich-people).

Sage condemns 為富不仁 (wei4 fu4 bu4 ren2 = is/are-rich-not-benevolent/kind = unprincipled millionaires), warns 富不過三代 (fu4 bu4 guo4 san1 dai4 = family's-wealth-won't-last-beyond-three-generations!)

by Diana Yue