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 progress

衝 Putonghua pronunciation: chong1 Cantonese pronunciation: chung1
Meaning: towards, dash, rush against, charge

衝 (radical 行 xing2, walk + 重 zhong4, heavy) = dash/charge: 衝力 (chong1 li4 = charging-force/stamina), 衝線 (chong1 xian4 = cross-finishing-line), 衝浪 (chong1 lang4 = rush-at-waves = surfing), 衝撞 (chong1 zhuang4 = rush-knock/push = rude offence). Plane 衝上雲霄 (chong1 shang4 yun2 xiao1 = rush-up-to-clouds-rain-clouds = soars into sky).
衝動 (chong1 dong4 = rush-move = rash, easily enraged) mobsters 衝擊 (chong1 ji1 = charge-attack = challenge) law-and-order, 衝過 (chong1 guo4 = charge-across) cordon, 橫衝直撞 (heng2 chong1 zhi2 zhuang4 = horizontal-charge-vertical-knock/hit = push, knock about), 衝突 (chong1 tu4 = charge-assault = clash) with police.

Hero musters up 衝勁 (chong1 jing4 = fighting strength/spirit), 衝鋒陷陣 (chong1 feng1 xian4 zhen4 = charge-spear-head-conquers-military-formation = fights/beats enemy).

by Diana Yue