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 centenary celebrations

百
Putonghua pronunciation: bai3
Cantonese pronunciation: baak3
Meanings: hundred, many

百 = hundred. Chinese count by tens: 個, 十, 百, 千, 萬 (ge4, shi2, bai3, qian1, wan4 = one-ten-hundred-thousand-ten-thousand). 百萬 (bai3 wan4 = 100-10,000 = 1 million). 億 (yi1 = hundred-million) = 100,000,000. China has 十三億 (shi2 san1 yi1 = ten-three-hundred-100,000,000 = 1,300,000,000 = 1.3 billion) people.


University celebrates建校百年 (jian4 xiao4 bai3 nian2 = build-school-hundred-years = school’s centenary). Novelist describes 人生百態 (ren2 sehn4 bai3 tai4 = people-lives-hundred-postures = human behavior in many walks of life).

by Diana Yue