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 trains

車 (chei) Putonghua pronunciation: chei
Cantonese pronunciation: chei
Meaning: car, vehicle, machine

車 (chei) is radical for car-related characters: 輪 (lun2, wheel), 轉 (zhuan3, revolve/turn), 輛 (zhan3, run over). 機車 (jie1 chei = machine-car) = engine. 上車 (shang4 chei = up/mount-car) = get into car. 開車 (kai1 chei = open-car) = drive/steer car.

車 (chei zhan3 = car-show) exhibits 輪車 (jiao4 chei = sedan-cars), 跑車 (pao3 chei = race-cars), 貨車 (huo4 chei = goods-vehicles/trucks), 多功能旅行車 (duo1 gong1 neng2 xiu1 lü3 chei = many-effect-ability-leisure-travel-car = multi-purpose vehicles = MPVs/minivans).

Shanghai built 磁懸浮 (ci2 xuan2 fu2 = magnet-suspend-float = magnetic levitation = mag-lev) train, but China’s choice is 高速火車 (gao1 su1 huo3 chei = high-speed-fire-car = high-speed trains) using 鐵軌 (tie3 gui3 = iron-rail/tracks).

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