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 growth

Putonghua pronunciation: chang2, zhang3
Cantonese pronunciation: cheung4, jeung2
Meanings: long, eternal, grow, expand

Adjective 長 (chang2) = long: 長度 (chang2 du4 = length~measurement), 長髮 (chang2 fa3 = long~hair), 長江 (chang2 jiang1 = Long~River = Yangtze River). 長眠 (chang2 mian2 = long~sleep) = the dead’s eternal sleep.

Verb/adjective 長 (zhang3) = elder/grow/expand: 生長 (sheng1 zhang3 = born~grow = grow), 增長 (zheng1 zhang3 = add-grow = expand/expansion), 長子 (zhang3 zi3 = eldest~son), 長官 (zhang3 guan1 = senior~officer).

霊長類 (ling2 zhang3 lei4 = soul~elder~species) = primates.

Plants 長葉 (zhang3 ye4 = grow~leaves), 長實 (zhang3 shi2 = bear~fruit). 長輩 (zhang3 bei = elderly~generation = seniors)

watch kids 長大 (zhang3 da4 = grow~big = grow up), 長高 (zhang3 gao1 = grow~tall), 長肉 (zhang3 rou4 = grow~flesh = put on flesh/muscles).

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