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 \ 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

樹
Putonghua pronunciation: shu4
Cantonese pronunciation: sue6
Meanings: tree, plant, establish

樹 (radical 木, mu4 = wood) = trees/shrubs having 根 (gen1, roots), 枝幹 (zhi1 gan4 = branches-trunk), 葉 (ye4, leaves). Noun 森林 (sen1 lin2 = dark/shady-forest) consists of six characters 木.

松柏 (song1 bai3 = pine-and-cypress) symbolize longevity. 榕樹 (rong2 shu4 = banyan-trees), 影樹 (ying3 shu4 = shadow-tree = flames of the forest) are common in Hong Kong. 植樹節 (zhi2 shu4 jie2 = plant-trees-festival) = Arbor Day.


by Diana Yue