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: zhuang4
Cantonese pronunciation: jong3
Meanings: strong, grand, bold, strengthen, boost

壯 (壯 pan2, axe + 亽 shi4, man) = strong/grand/bold. Farmers raise 肥壯 (fei2 zhuang4 = fat-strong/healthy) crops/animals. Tourists love 壯麗 (zhuang4 li4 = grand-beautiful) landscapes, 壯觀 (zhuang4 guan1 = grand-view = visually astounding) scenes. 壯士 (zhuang4 shi4 = strong/brave-man/warrior) 壯志凌雲 (zhuang4 zhi4 ling2 yun2 = brave-aim-soar-clouds = has soaring/lofty spirit/aim).

Athletes have 壯健 (zhuang4 jian4 = strong-healthy) physique. Men in 壯年 (zhuang2 nian2 = strong-years = prime) are 強壯 (qiang2 zhuang4 = sturdy-strong), scoff at foodstuffs/drugs that 壯陽 (zhuang4 yang2 = strengthen-Yang/male-potency = increase sexual virility).

Ousting oldies, 少壯派 (shao4 zhuang4 pai4 = young-strong-group = younger faction) 壯膽 (zhuang4 dan3 = boost-gall-bladder = gets bold), 壯大 (zhuang4 da4 = strong-big = grows/ expands).

by Diana Yue