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 beginning and end

層
Putonghua pronunciation: ceng2
Cantonese pronunciation: chang4
Meaning: layer, tier, stratum

層 (radical 尸 shi1, person/corpse) means layer: 岩層 (yan2 ceng2 = rock-layers), 雲層 (yün2 ceng2 = cloud-strata), 層巒叠嶂 (ceng2 luan2 die2 zhang4 = tiers-of-hills-piled-up-mountains). 千層糕 (qian1 ceng2 gao1 = thousand-layer-cake) is custard in mille-feuille.

Youths needn’t be myopic. Life has many層面 (ceng2 mian4 = tiers-faces/aspects/facets), 層次 (ceng2 ci4 = levels-grades/shades). Look beyond一層樓 (yi1 ceng2 lou2 = one-storey-building = an apartment/condo/flat). Opportunities層出不窮 (ceng2 chu1 bu4 qiong2 = layer-out-no-exhaust = are endless).

Promoted from低層 (di1 ceng2 = lower/bottom-stratum) to中層 (zhong1 ceng2 = middle-stratum) to高層 (gao1 ceng2= upper/top-level) management, graduate's perspectives更上一層樓 (geng4 shang4 yi1 ceng2 lou2 = more-up-one-storey-building = rise to new heights).