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 hiking

氣

Putonghua pronunciation: qi4
Cantonese pronunciation: hei3
Meanings: breath, gas, qi, energy

氣 = air/gas: 空氣 (kong1 qi4 = empty-gas = air), 氧氣 (yang3 qi4 = oxygen-gas), 喜氣 (xi3 qi4 = happy/cheerful-air/expression), 怒氣 (nu4 qi4 = angry-puff = anger/ire), 生氣 (sheng1 qi4 = grow-angry). Teenagers have 青春氣息 (qing1 chun1 qi4 xi1 = green-spring-breath-exhaled-air = zest of youth). Patient 恢復元氣 (huil fu2 yuan2 qi4 = recovers-primary-energy = re-gains energy/health), goes hiking, enjoys 天朗氣清 (tian1 lang3 qi4 qing1 = sky-sunny-air-clean/pure = fine weather).

In Chinese philosophy/medicine, 氣 (qi4) means energy-flow. 氣功 (qi4 gong1 = breathing-exercise/kungfu = qi-gong) practitioner 養氣 (yang3 qi4 = cultivates-energy), 運氣 (yun4 qi4 = summons/musters-energy). Singers use 丹田之氣 (dan1 tian2 zhi1 qi4 = pubic-region-'s-breath = deep breath from below diaphragm).

by Diana Yue