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 rejuvenation

增
Putonghua pronunciation: zeng1
Cantonese pronunciation: jang1
Meaning: add, increase, rise, grow, gain, extend, strengthen, enhance, multiply

增 (radical 土 tu3, earth) means 增加 (zeng1 jia1 = increase-rise/grow). Factories 增产 (zeng1 chan3 = increase-production), economy 增长 (zeng1 zhang3 = expands-grows). 增援 (zeng1 yuan2 = additional-assistance) = more troops/help deployed. 增值税 (zeng1 zhi2 shui4 = add-worth-tax) = value-added tax.

Traveling 增广见闻 (zeng1 guang3 jian4 wen2 = add-broaden-see-hear = broadens knowledge/views). Communication 增进 (zeng1 jin4 = promotes-strengthens) friendship.

Teenagers 增高 (zeng1 gao1 = grow taller), appetite 大增 (da4 zeng1 = hugely-increase). Sage advises: 增强 (zeng1 qiang2 = increase-strengthen) all-round abilities, 為國增光 (wei4 guo2 zeng1 guang1 = for-country-add-lustre = strive/shine, be our country’s pride), otherwise 馬齒徒增 (ma3 ci3 tu2 zeng1 = horse’s-teeth-uselessly-increase = you’ll grow old without achieving anything).

by Diana Yue