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 walls

城 (radical 土 tu3 = earth/mud)
Putonghua pronunciation: cheng 2
Cantonese pronunciation: sing 4
Meanings: wall, walled city, town, city

城 = wall: 萬里長城 (wan4 li3 chang2 cheng2 = ten-thousand-li/miles-long-wall = the Great Wall of China).

城鎮 (cheng2 zhen4 = cities-towns) = large/small towns: 城市 (cheng2 shi4 = town-market = city), 縣城 (xian4 cheng2 = county-town), 省城 (sheng3 cheng2 = province-city = provincial capital), 都城 (du1 cheng2 = capital-city).

城裡人 (cheng2 li3 ren2 = city-inside-persons) = town-dwellers, 鄉下人 (xiang1 xia4 ren2 = country-down-persons) = country/village-dwellers. 城鄉差距 (cheng2 xiang1 cha1 ju4 = town-country-difference-distance) = urban and rural economies’ economic gap.

城市化 (cheng2 shi4 hua4 = town-city-transform) = urbanization.

四方城 (si4 fang1 cheng2 = four-side/square-city) means mahjong game. 羣志成城 (zhong4 zhi4 cheng2 cheng2 = multitude-willpower-becomes-wall) means “United, we stand!”

by Diana Yue