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 zis 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 donations

Putonghua pronunciation: zeng4
Cantonese pronunciation: jang6
Meanings: give, donate, bestow, endow

贈 (radical 貝 bei4, seashell/money) = 贈送 (zeng4 song4 = give-as-present). Painter’s collection 贈與 (zeng4 yú3 = is-given/donated-to) museum, Shoppers get 贈品 (zeng4 pin3 = gift-object = free gifts), 贈券 (zeng4 qùan4 = gift-tickets/coupons) from store’s 大贈送 (da4 zeng4 song4 = big-give-as-present = giveaway sale).

Under-privileged schoolchildren need 贈醫捐藥 (zeng4 yī1 jùān1 yao4 = give-doctor-donate-drugs = free medical care/drugs), 贈閱課本 (zeng4 yuè4 ke4 ben3 = free-read-lesson-texts = free copies of textbooks).

Retiring tycoon gives 臨別贈言 (lin2 bie2 zeng4 yan2 = upon-departure-give-words = farewell speech): He gave 饋贈 (kui4 zeng4 = offer-food-gift = gifts/donations) to 回饋社會 (hui2 kui4 she4 hui4 = return-gift-society = in return for what he gained from society).

by Diana Yue