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 housing

建
Putonghua pronunciation: jian4
Cantonese pronunciation: gin3
Meanings: build, construct, erect, raise, establish


Government builds 基礎建設 (ji1 chu3 jian4 she4 = basic-foundation-build-establish = infrastructures), hires 建築師 (jian4 zhu1 shi1 = build-construct-masters = architects), engineers, 乘建商 (cheng2 jian4 shang1 = accept-construct-businessman/firm = building contractors), purchases建材 (jian4 cai2 = building-materials), 建造 (jian4 zao4 = build-construct) low-cost estates.

Critics 建議 (jian4 yi4 = raise-discussion = propose): 改建 (gai3 jian4 = change/re-build) old estates, outlaw 僭建物 (jian4 jian4 wu4 = wrongful/usurp-built-object = illegal structures).

by Diana Yue