

Character Builder 您好嗎？

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 fish

Putonghua pronunciation: *yüe4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *yeuk6*

Meanings: leap, jump

躍 (radical 足 *zhu1*, foot) = 跳躍 (*tiao4 yue4* = jump~leap-forward). Gazelles 飛躍 (*fei1 yue4* = swiftly~leap). Pulse 躍動 (*yue4 dong4* = jumps~move/throbs). Socialites are 活躍 (*huo2 yue4* = alive~leap = active). Lottery-winner 雀躍 (*que1 yue4* = bird~leap = leaps in joy).

躍躍欲試 (*yue4 yue4 yu4 shi4* = leap~leap~desire~try) means keen to try. PRC launched 大躍進 (*da4 yue4 jin4* = the Great Leap Forward) in 1950s.

Carp-fish in 黃河 (*Huang2 He2* = Yellow-River) swim upstream, leap through the rapids at 龍門 (*Long2 Men2*, literally “Dragon-Gate”) to spawn (or become dragons, as legends say). Hence idiom 魚躍龍門 (*yu2 yue4 long2 men2* = fish-leap-over-Dragon-Gate) describes scholar winning top honors and gaining access to status and fame.

by Diana Yue