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 dragons

Putonghua pronunciation: long2
Cantonese pronunciation: lung4
Meanings: dragon

In Chinese iconography, 龍 and 鳳 (feng4, phoenix) symbolize Emperor-Empress or marvelous/handsome people. Decorative motif 龍翔鳳舞 (long2 xiang2 feng4 wu3 = dragon-soars-phoenix-dances) symbolizes universal harmony/celebration. 龍顏大悦 (long2 yan2 da4 yue4 = dragon's-visage-great-cheer) means "The Emperor/Boss is very pleased!"

Martial artists perform 舞龍 (wu3 long2 = dance-dragon = Dragon Dance), 舞獅 (wu3 shi1 = dance-lion = Lion Dance) during festivities. 賽龍舟 (sai4 long2 zhou1 = compete-dragon-boat) = dragon-boat race. 生龍活虎 (sheng1 long2 huo2 hu3 = alive-dragon-living-tiger) describes athlete's virile movements.

Multiple-participants' project needs 龍頭 (long2 tou2 = dragon-head = initiator/leader). Many extraordinary/legendary characters/talents keep low profiles in Hong Kong, like name of movie “臥虎藏龍” (wo4 hu3 cang2 long2, “Crouching-Tiger-Hidden-Dragon”).

by Diana Yue