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 job-hunting

浮 (radical 氵 = water shui3, water) = float: 浮水 (fu2 shui3 = float-on-water), 浮雲 (fu2 yun2 = floating-clouds). Memories 浮現 (fu2 xian4 = float-appear/take shape). Europeans (non-English) pronounce “UFO” (acronym for “unidentified flying object”) as [ˈjufo] (like “you-foe”), hence Chinese transliteration “幽浮” (you1 fu2, literally “indistinct-floating”, a term with mysterious feel).

人心浮動 (ren2 xin1 fu2 dong4 = people’t-hearts-float-move) describes disturbing times. Because 人浮於事 (ren2 fu2 yu1 shi1 = people-float-on-things/jobs = too many people, not enough jobs), graduates 浮沉 (fu2 chen2 = float/emerge-sink/submerge = sometimes do so-so, sometimes not).

Forget about 浮名 (fu2 ming2 = floating-name = empty fame). 浮生若夢 (fu2 sheng1 ruo4 meng4 = floating-life-resembles-dream = “Life is but a dream”).

by Diana Yue