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

飛

Putonghua pronunciation: fei1
Cantonese pronunciation: fei1
Meanings: fly

飛鳥 (fei1 niao3 = flying-birds) 飛翔 (fei1 xiang2 = fly-glide-on-air = fly) in 天空 (tian1 kong1 = sky-empty = sky). Zoos exhibit 飛禽走獸 (fei1 qin2 zou3 shou4 = flying-birds-running-animals = various creatures).

Sprinter 飛奔 (fei1 ben1 = fly-run = speeds/dashes) to end-post. Driver gets fine for 飛車 (fei1 che1 = fly-car = speeding). 飛彈 (fei1 dan4 = fly-bullet) = rocket. Pop diva 神采飛揚 (shen2 cai3 fei1 yang2 = spirit-color/flair-fly-wave/flash = oozes radiance/flair/charm), 拋飛吻 (pao1 fei1 wen3 = throw-fly-kiss = blows/throws kisses) at fans.

China’s 飛躍進步 (fei1 yue4 jin4 bu4 = fly-leap-advance-step = rapid progress) indicates 蛟龍騰飛 (jiao1 long2 teng2 fei1 = water-dragon-dragon-dragon-ascend-fly = the rise of the dragon).

by Diana Yue