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 “ 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 fame and notoriety

揚 Putonghua pronunciation: yang2
Cantonese pronunciation: yeung4
Meaning: fly, flash, raise, wave, flap, spread

揚 (揚 = 手 shou3, hand + 易 yang2, wave) means wave/flap/spread. 揚手 (yang2 shou3 = wave-hand), 揚帆 (yang2 fan1 = wave-sail = set sail). 揚威 (yang2 wei1 = wave-ferocity) = flaunt/exert military might. 揚眉 (yang2 mei2 = raising-eyebrows) is expression of defiance/triumph.

Jockey 跳躍揚鞭 (yue4 ma3 yang2 bian1 = leap-horse-wave-whip = rides gallantly flashing whip). Man in love 神采飛揚 (shen2 cai3 fei1 yang2 = spirit-radiance-fly-wave = looks radiant/exultant).

Ambitious son 揚言 (yang2 yan2 = wave-word = declares/announces): Will 發揚光大 (fa1 yang2 guang1 da4 = boost-spread-brighten-enlarge = upgrade/expand) family business, 揚名聲, 顯父母 (yang2 ming2 sheng1, xian3 fub4 mu3 = wave-name-sound, manifest-father-mother = win great fame, bring glory/honor to parents).

by Diana Yue