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 Solomon’s wisdom

爭
Putonghua pronunciation: zheng1
Cantonese pronunciation: jang1
Meanings: compete, vie, fight for

Ideogram 爭 shows hands (手 and 扌) wrangling for object in middle: 競爭 (jing4 zheng1 = compete-fight), 爭執 (zheng1 zhi2 = fight-hold-fast = quarrel), 爭吵 (zheng1 chao3 = quarrel-shout). 爭先恐後 (zheng1 xian1 kong3 hou4 = compete-for-before-fear-behind) = scramble to jump queue.

Brothers 爭家產 (zheng1 jia1 chan3 = fight-over-family-assets). Catwalk models 爭妍鬥麗 (zheng1 yan2 dou2 li4 = vie-lovely-compete-beautiful = flaunt eye-catching make-ups/outfits). Swimmers 爭分奪秒 (zheng1 fen2 duo2 miao3 = vie-minute-snatch-second = fight every second) to 爭取 (zheng1 qü3 = strive-for-achieve) world record.

Communists launch 階級鬥爭 (jie1 ji2 dou4 zheng1 = step-class-battle-fight = class struggle). 與世無爭 (yü3 shi4 wu2 zheng1 = with-world-no-quarrel/compete) describes lifestyle/philosophy of people without ambitions/enemies.

by Diana Yue