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 feeding of the five thousand

魚

Putonghua pronunciation: yū2
Cantonese pronunciation: yue4
Meanings: fish

魚 has radical ⽐ (= water, shui3). 一尾魚 (yi1 wei3 yū2 = one-tail-fish) = a fish. 魚米之鄉 (yū2 mi2 zhi1 xiang1 = fish-rice-’s-homeland) = areas rich in agriculture and fisheries.

Verb 漁 (yū2) = 打魚 (da3 yū2 = hit/kill-fish) = 捕魚 (bu4 yū2 = catch-fish) = to fish. 漏網之魚 (lou4 wang3 zhi1 yū2 = drip-net-’s-fish) describes lucky escapee from trap/persecution. 釣魚 (diao4 yū2 = hook-up-fish) = angling.

Jesus’ disciples were 漁夫 (yū2 fu1 = fisher-men) in 加利利海 (jia1 li4 li4 hai3 = “Ga-li-lee”-transliterated-sea = Sea/Lake of Galilee). Jesus told them: I will make you 得人如得魚 (de2 ren2 ru2 de2 yū2 = get-people-resemble-get-fish = “I will make you fishers of men”.

by Diana Yue