The basic unit of the Chinese language is the 象 (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each 象 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 象 together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each 象 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 象 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 progress

躍 (radical 足 zu2, foot) means 跳躍 (tiao4 yue4 = jump-leap/hop). Gazelle 飛躍 (fei1 yue4 = fly-leap = leaps/runs like flying). Fugitive 躍下 (yue4 xia4 = jumps-down/off) cliff. 躍躍欲試 (yue4 yue4 yue4 shi4 = leap-leap-desire-try) describes person eager/itching to try something.

Scholar 鯷躍龍門 (li3 yue4 long2 men2 = carp-jump-over-dragon-gate = comes first in national exam), family 歡躍 (huan1 yue4 = joyfully-leap-up). Novel's characters 躍然纸上 (yue4 ran2 zhi3 shang4 = leap-indeed-paper-surface = are very vivid).

In 1958 PRC launched 大躍進 (da4 yue4 jin4 = Big-Leap-Forward) movement, unrealistic, failed attempt to increase agricultural and industrial production many times. Now country's GDP 躍居首位 (yue4 juj1 shou1 wei4 = leap-occupy-first-position = becomes first) in Asia.

by Diana Yue