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 China's economic take-off

翻
Cantonese pronunciation: faan1
Meanings: flip, turn over

Pictogram 翻 = 番 (fan1, turn/round) + 羽 (yü3, feathers/wings) means flip over. 翻動 (fan1 dong4 = turn-move) = stir. 翻跟斗 (fan1 gen1 dou3 = turn-heel-bin) = turn somersault.

Translator 翻閱 (fan1 yüe4 = flips-through-reads) books, 翻譯 (fan1 yi4 = turn-translates) documents. 翻案 (fan1 an4 = turn-over-case) = re-assess/change verdict. After apartment’s 翻新 (fan1 xin1 = turn-new = remodeling/renovation), rent 翻一番 (fan1 yi1 fan1 = turn-over-one-time = doubles).

After Revolution caused 天翻地覆 (tian1 fan1 di4 fu1 = heaven-turns-over-earth-falls = great turmoil), peasants and workers 翻身 (fan1 shen1 = turn-body = are restored/raised to respectable status). China’s GDP will 翻兩番 (fan1 liang3 fan1 = turn-two-flip-over = grow by 2 square X 2, i.e. 8 times).

by Diana Yue