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 V 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 progress

騰
Putonghua pronunciation: teng2
Cantonese pronunciation: tang1
Meaning: rise, gallop, leap, soar, fly, rise, vacate, seeethe


萬馬奔騰 (wan4 ma3 ben1 teng2 = ten-thousand-horses-run-gallop) describes horde of galloping horses. 蛟龍騰飛 (jiao1 long2 teng2 fei1 = water-dragon-dragon-soar-fly) describes dragon’s ascent or hero/country’s rise to fame/power. Fairies 腾雲駕霧 (teng2 yun2 jia4 wu4 = ascend-to-clouds-ride-on-mist = move/ride on clouds).

Retiree 腾出空位 (teng2 chu1 kong11 wei4 = vacate-out-empty-seat = leaves position empty). Successor takes over, 飛黃騰達 (fei1 huang2 teng2 da2 = “Fei-Huang”,mythical-horse,-soars-rises = soars to high ranks rapidly).

by Diana Yue