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 the prodigal son

Putonghua pronunciation: lang4
Cantonese pronunciation: long6
Meanings: unrestrained, roaming

浪 Noun 浪 means wave. Verb 浪流 (liu2 lang4 = flow-wave) = roam/wander. 浪流漢 (liu2 lang4 han4 = flow-wave-man) = tramp. 浪人 (lang4 ren2 = roaming-person) is Chinese translation of Japanese term “ronin”.

浪費 (lang4 fei4 = unrestrained-spend) = waste/wasteful. 浪得虚名 (lang4 de2 xü1 ming2 = waste-obtain-empty-name) describes much-praised person who doesn’t deserve his fame.

浪子 (lang4 zi3 = wandering-son = prodigal son) 浪跡天涯 (lang4 ji1 tian1 ya2 = roam-steps-sky-edge) = roams far away, 生活放浪 (sheng1 huo2 fang4 lang4 = born-live-release-roam = leads unrestrained/wild life-style). 浪子回頭金不換! (lang4 zi3 hui2 tou2 jin1 bu4 huan4 = prodigal-son-return-head-gold-not-exchange) = A prodigal son’s repentance and self-reform cannot be purchased even with gold!

by Diana Yue