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 Olympic Games

Putonghua pronunciation: **shang4**
Cantonese pronunciation: verb/adverb **sheung5**

adjective **seung6**

Meanings: up, above, forward, mount, rise, ascend, advance

Antonyms 上下 (shang4 xia4 = up-down) show finger pointing upwards/downwards from horizon. 上面 (shang4 mian4 = up-face) = above. 上策 (shang4 ce4 = top-strategy) = best/preferred idea/plan. 上流 (shang4 liu2 = upper-flow) describes river’s上游 (shang4 yiu2 = up-stream) or decent/high-class people.

Rider/project 上馬 (shang4 ma3 = up-horse = mounts/is launched). Company 上市 (shang4 shi4 = mounts-market = goes public). Competitor has 上進心 (shang4 jin4 xin1 = forward-advance-heart = positiveness/ambition), 力爭上游 (li4 zheng1 shang4 you2 = strength/effort-vie-up-stream = fights hard to overtake others). Soldiers charge, crying: “上!” (shang4 = “Forward!”)

Sage warns: 上山容易下山難 (shang4 shan1 rong2 yi4 xia4 shan1 nan2 = up-hill-allowable-easy-down-hill-difficult = It’s easier to escalate/grow than down-size/retreat).

by Diana Yue