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 Third World

Putonghua pronunciation: zhen 4
Cantonese pronunciation: jan 3
Meanings: shake, vibrate, oscillate, rouse

振 = 振動 (zhen dong 44 = vibrate-move). Birds 振翅 (zhen chi 44 = flap-wings) to fly. Company bankruptcies make stock-market indices 振蕩 (zhen dang 44 = shake-sway = fluctuate/oscillate). Rally speeches 振奮人心 (zhen fen ren xin 4421 = rouse-excite-people’s-hearts = are very stirring).

Losers may 一蹶不振 (yi jue bu zhen 1244 = one-fall-no-rouse = once knocked down, never rise again). We encourage them: “振作起來!” (zhen zuo qi lai 4432 = rouse-act-up-come = “C’mon, pull yourself together!”)

Leader of Chinese revolution 振臂一呼 (zhen bi yi hu 4411 = rouse-arm-one-cry = shout with arm raised): “振興中華!” (zhen xing Zhong Hua 4112 = rouse-rise-Middle-Flower = “Make China strong again!”)

by Diana Yue