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 fishing

釣 (radical 金 jin1 = gold/metal)
Putonghua pronunciation: diao 4
Cantonese pronunciation: diu 3
Meanings: hook, angle, fishing

釣魚 (diao4 yu2 = hook-fish = angling) requires 釣竿 (diao4 gan1 = angling-bamboo-rod = fishing rod), 釣絲 (diao4 si1 = fishing-silk/thread = fishing line), 釣鉤 (diao4 gou1 = fishing-hook/angle), 釣餌 (diao4 er3 = fishing-lures/baits).

Hypocrites 洗名釣譽 (gu1 ming2 diao4 yu4 = sell-name-angle-reputation = pay money to purchase honour/fame). 釣大魚 (diao4 da4 yu2 = catch-big-fish) means game-fishing or con-men targeting big object. 上釣 (shang4 diao4 = up-angle) means taking fisherman’s/con-man’s bait and getting hooked.

孤舟蓑笠翁 (gu1 zhou1 suo1 li4 weng1 = single-skiff-cape-of-hay-old-man), 獨釣寒江雪 (du2 diao4 han2 jiang1 xue3 = alone-angle/fish-cold-river-snow) are immortal lines in Chinese poetry describing an angler wearing a hay-raincoat fishing on a skiff in a snowing landscape.

by Diana Yue