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 horses

Putonghua pronunciation: qi2
Cantonese pronunciation: ke4, kei4
Meaning: ride, horse-and-rider

騎 (radical 馬 ma3, horse) means ride: 騎馬 (qi2 ma3 = ride-horse), 騎車 (qi2 che1 = ride-car = rides bicycle), 騎兵 (qi2 bing1 = horseback-soldier). Noun 騎 means horse-and-rider. 騎術 (qi2 shu4 = riding-method) = equestrian art/sports.

In mythology, Jesus 騎駱 (qi2 lu2 = rides-donkey), Bodhisattva Manjusri 騎獅 (qi2 shi1 = rides-lion), Bodhisattva Samantabhadra 騎象 (qi2 xiang4 = rides-elephant). However, 騎虎難下 (qi2 hu3 nan2 xia4 = ride-tiger-difficult-to-dismount) means unable to quit difficult/dangerous involvement.

Medieval 騎士 (qi2 shi4 = ride-soldiers = knights) uphold 騎士精神 (qi2 shi4 jing1 shen2 = knight’s-essence-spirit = chivalry). Terrorists 騎劫 (qi2 jie2 = ride-rob = hi-jack) airplane.

Opportunists 騎牆 (qi2 qiang2 = sit-astride-wall), look both ways, won’t promise, won’t commit.

by Diana Yue