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 *nouveau-riche*

炫
Putonghua pronunciation: xüan4
Cantonese pronunciation: yuen6
Meanings: bright, glittering, flaring, dazzling, dazzle, flaunt

炫 (radical 火 huo3, fire + 玄 xüan2, deep/abysmal) describes bright/glittering flames/sight. 炫目 (xüan2 mu4 = glitter-eye) = eye-dazzling. 炫麗 (xüan2 li4 = glittering-beautiful) describes glamorous clothes/artwork.

暴發戶 (bao4 fa1 hu4 = abrupt-rich-person = nouveau riche) enjoy driving 名車 (ming2 che1 = famous-car = brand-name cars) 招搖過市 (zhao1 yao2 guo4 shi4 = wave-sway-pass-market = swaggering, going flashy in public).

纨袴子弟 (wan2 ku4 zi3 di4 = silken-trousers-sons-boys = useless sons of wealthy families) enjoy 浮誇 (fu2 kua1 = floating-exaggerated = flamboyant) life-style, write 微博 (wei1 bo2 = micro-“b”log-transliterated = microblogs) to炫耀 (xüan2 yao4 = dazzle-glory = show off) their財富 (cai2 fu4 = money-wealth = wealth), i.e. 炫富 (xüan2 fu4 = flaunt-their-wealth).

by Diana Yue