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

放
Putonghua pronunciation: fang 4
Cantonese pronunciation: fong 2
Meanings: release

In recreational fishing, angler enjoys 宁静 (ning2 jing4 = peace-and-quiet), develops 耐心 (nai4 xin1 = endurance-heart = patience), love of 大自然 (da4 zi4 ran2 = big-naturally-so = Mother Nature). Fish caught are 放回水中 (fang4 hui2 shui3 zhong1 = released-back-water-inside = returned to the water). 放 means relaxing, releasing: 放松 (fang4 song1 = open-up-relax), 放下重擔 (fang4 xia4 xhong4 dan4 = put-down-heavy-weight = relieved of burden), 放心 (fang4 xin1 = relax-heart = feel relieved). Shepherds 放羊 (fang4 yang2 = let-roam-sheep/goats), falconers 放鹰 (fang4 ying1 = let-fly-eagle = train hawks).

Buddhists practice 放生 (fang4 sheng1 = release-life = releasing captured animals back into the wild) to 積德 (ji1 de2 = collect/hoard-virtue/merit = improve good deeds record).

by Diana Yue