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:

1\(^{st}\) tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2\(^{nd}\) tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3\(^{rd}\) tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4\(^{th}\) 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 Dragon Boat Festival

五 五 = five/fifth: 五年 (wu3 nian2 = five-years), 十五 (shi2 wu3 = ten-five = fifteenth), 五哥 (wu3 ge1 = fifth-elder-brother). 第五 (di4 wu3 = order-five = fifth on list).

五官 (wu3 guan1 = five-organs) = eyes-nose-mouth-ears. Farmers plant 五穀 (wu3 gu3 = five-cereal-grains). 五指山 (wu3 zhi3 shan1 = five-fingers-mountain) means Buddha’s cosmos-gripping hand or superior/tycoon’s over-powering/inescapable control. 倒翻五味架 (dao3 fan1 wu3 we4 jia4 = pour-over-five-tastes/condiments-rack) means getting all kinds of indefinable feelings.

Dragon Boat Festival falls on 五月五日 (wu3 yue4 wu3 ri1 = fifth-month-fifth-day = fifth day of fifth lunar month) of 陰曆 (yin1 li4 = moon/lunar-calendar), i.e. 農曆 (nong2 li4 = farmers’calendar/almanac), after 五月 (wu3 yue4 = fifth-month = May).

by Diana Yue