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 Chinese national anthem

起 (radical 走 zhou3, run) means rise/swell/start. 起头 (qi3 tou2 = start-head) = beginning/start. Race has 起點 (qi3 dian3 = starting-point). River has 起源 (qi3 yuan2 = start-source = source). Currents 起伏 (qi3 fu2 = rise-and-fall). Lightning-struck house 起火 (qi3 huo3 = start-fire = catches fire).

起床 (qi3 chuang2 = rise-bed) = get out of bed. 起居飲食 (qi3 ji1 yin3 shi2 = rising-staying-in-drinking-eating) = aspects of everyday home-life. Sympathizers wish patient/business 起色 (qi3 se1 = rising-color = improvement). 起心 (qi3 xin1 = rise-heart) = develop covetous intention for something/someone.

“起來!” (qi3 lai2 = rise-come = “Arise!”) is Chinese national anthem’s call-to-arms, rallying people to 起義 (qi3 yi4 = rise-righteous = revolt).

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