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 old family money

揚 yang2
Cantonese pronunciation: yeung4
Meanings: raise, wave, flap, spread, promote

揚 (扄 shou3, hand + 易 yang2, wave) means wave/flap/spread. 揚手 (yang2 shou3 = wave-hand). Banners 飄揚 (piao1 yang2 = float-wave = flutter). 張揚 (zhang1 yang2 = open-wave) means publicizing intent or contemplated action. Army/bully 耀武揚威 (yao4 wu3 yang2 wei1 = flash-weapons-wave-ferocity = flaunts military might).

吐氣揚眉 (bu4 qi4 yang2 mei2 = spit-breath-rise-eyebrows) describes person triumphing over defeat/oppression. 神采飛揚 (shen2 cai3 fei1 yang2 = spirit-radiance-fly-wave) describes inspired/joyful person’s radiant/exultant look.

Ambitious son wants to 發揚光大 (fa1 yang2 guang1 da4 = boost-wave-bright-big = upgrade, expand) family business, 揚名聲, 顯父母 (yang2 ming2 sheng1, xian3 fu4 mu3 = wave-name-sound, manifest-father-mother = make a big name, bring honor to parents).

by Diana Yue