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 cycling

Putonghua pronunciation: qing1
Cantonese pronunciation: hing1
Meanings: light-weight

輕 describes weight/mood: 輕微 (qing1 weil1 = light-tiny = slight) symptoms, 輕鬆 (qing1 song1 = light-untie = relaxed/relieved) mood, 輕食 (qing1 shi2 = light-food = snack), 輕音樂 (qing1 yin1 yue4 = light-sound-music = light music). 輕輕地 (qing1 qing1 de0 = light-light-adverbial) = lightly/softly/gently.

輕視 (qing1 shi4 = light-look) = despise/look down on someone/something. Team which 輕敵 (qing1 di2 = light-enemy = under-estimates opponent) loses game. 不識輕重 (bu4 shi2 qing1 zhong4 = no-know-light-heavy) describes dumb person who cannot assess/prioritize issues.

Cyclist wears 輕裝 (qing1 zhuang1 = light/casual-clothing), 身輕如燕 (shen1 qing1 ru2 yan4 = body-light-resemble-swallow = moves weightlessly), feels 輕快 (qing1 kuai4 = light-weighted-fast/cheerful), 輕易 (qing1 yi4 = light-easy = easily) reaches destination.

by Diana Yue