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. **1st tone**: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2. **2nd tone**: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3. **3rd tone**: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4. **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 fish

**躍**

- **Putonghua pronunciation**: yüe4
- **Cantonese pronunciation**: yeuk6
- **Meanings**: leap, jump

躍 (radical 足 zhu1, foot) = 跳躍 (tiao4 yüe4 = jump-leap-forward). Gazelles 飛躍 (fei1 yüe4 = swiftly-leap). Pulse 躍動 (yüe4 dong4 = jumps-move/throbs). Socialites are 活躍 (huo2 yüe4 = alive-leap = active). Lottery-winner 雀躍 (qüe1 yüe4 = bird-leap = leaps in joy).

躍躍欲試 (yüe4 yüe4 yü4 shi4 = leap-leap-desire-try) means keen to try. PRC launched 大躍進 (da4 yüe4 jin4 = the Great Leap Forward) in 1950s.

Carp-fish in 黃河 (Huang2 He2 = Yellow-River) swim upstream, leap through the rapids at 龍門 (Long2 Men2, literally “Dragon-Gate”) to spawn (or become dragons, as legends say). Hence idiom 魚躍龍門 (yü2 yüe4 long2 men2 = fish-leap-over-Dragon-Gate) describes scholar winning top honors and gaining access to status and fame.

*by Diana Yue*