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 animal stories

龟
Putonghua pronunciation: gui1
Cantonese pronunciation: gwai1
Meanings: tortoise

Character 龟 shows tortoise’s head, body, tail. 烏龜 (wu1 gui1 = black-tortoise) symbolizes長壽 (chang2 shou4 = long-life = longevity). However, 縮頭烏龜 (shu1 tou2 wu1 gui1 = withdraw-head-tortoise) means coward. 龜頭 (gui1 tou2 = tortoise-head) means tip of male penis.

Because 龜 (gui1) and歸 (gui1, home-coming/return) are synonyms, “海龜派” (hai3 gui1 pai4 = sea-turtle-group) means “海歸派” (hai3 gui1 pai4 = sea-return-group), i.e. Chinese studying/working abroad returning to China to find career.

In Aesop’s fable, hare is 懶惰 (lan3 duo4 = lazy-procrastinate = lazy), 睡過頭 (shui4 guo4 tou2 = sleep-pass-head = oversleeps). Tortoise 努力 (nu3 li4 = strain-strength = tries hard), 不停跑 (bu4 ting2 pao3 = non-stop-runs) and wins.

by Diana Yue