Character Builder

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

兔
Putonghua pronunciation: tu4
Cantonese pronunciation: to3
Meanings: rabbit

兔子 (tu4 zi0 = rabbit-diminutive = rabbit) has 大耳朵 (da4 er3 duo1 = (big-ears), 短尾巴 (duan3 wei3 ba1 = short/stubby-tail). Chinese believe 玉兔 (yü4 tu4 = jade-rabbit) accompanies 嫦娥 (Chang2 Er2 = Moon Lady/Goddess) on the moon.

狡兔三窟 (jiao3 tu4 san1 ku1 = sly-hare-three-holes) describes野兔 (ye3 tu4 = wild-rabbit = hare) or person using multiple hideouts/exits for camouflage/escape. Children’s 兔唇 (tu4 chun2 = rabbit-lip = cleft lip) needs surgery.

Chinese saying “鸟尽弓藏, 兔死狗烹” (niao3 jin4 gong1 cang2, tu4 si3 gou3 peng1 = birds-all-gone/killed-bow-hidden, hares-die-dog-cooked) describes hunter who neglects/destroys his bow/hound after preys/birds/hares are caught — analogous to cold-blooded conqueror who suppresses/eliminates loyal supporters who helped him win.

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