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

狐
Putonghua pronunciation: hu2
Cantonese pronunciation: woo4
Meanings: fox

狐 = 狐狸 (hu2 li2 = fox-badger) = fox. 銀狐 (yin2 hu2 = silver-fox) has prized fur. In Chinese legends, 妖狐 (yao1 hu2 = demon foxes) become 狐仙 (hu2 xian1 = fox-fairies), appear as beautiful/bewitching women, so 狐狸精 (hu2 li2 jing1 = fox-demon) means bad women who snatch husbands.

Foxes/thieves 偷雞摸狗 (tou1 jil mo1 gou3 = steal-chicken-touch-dog = steal/natch small animals/things). 臭狐 (chou4 hu2 = stink-fox) = repellant body odor. Villain 露出狐狸尾巴 (lu4 chu1 hu2 li2 wei3 ba1 = shows-out-fox’s-tail) = sly/evil intentions exposed.

Aesop’s fox famously says: “吃不到的葡萄是酸的!” (chi1 bu4 dao4 de0 pu2 tao2 shi4 suan1 de0 = eat-un-available~’s~grapes~are~sour): “Unobtainable grapes/things are sour/no good!”

by Diana Yue