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 \ 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 more animal stories

Putonghua pronunciation: hu3
Cantonese pronunciation: foo2
Meanings: tiger

虎 (= 老虎 lao2 hu3 = old-tiger) is fierce/brave/cruel. 虎父犬子 (hu3 fu4 quan3 zi3 = tiger-father-dog-son) describes contrast between successful father and disappointing son. 揚虎鬚 (luo1 hu3 xu1 = stroke-tiger’s-whiskers) means irritating/taunting fierce strong person/power.

In legend 武松打虎 (Wu3 Song1 da3 hu3 = Wu-Song-beats-tiger), hero Wu Song 喝醉 (he1 zui4 = drink-drunken = got drunk), encountered tiger, 空手殺虎 (kong1 shou3 sa1 hu3 = empty/bare-handed-killed-tiger).

In Buddhist legend, young prince saw 女虎 (ci1 hu3 = female-tiger) with cubs starving, showed 慈悲 (ci2 bei1 = kind-sorrow = mercy), 自殘 (zi4 can2 = self-hurt = wounded himself), 捨身餵虎 (she3 shen1 si4 hu3 = sacrifice-body-feed-tiger), let tiger eat his body and milk her cubs.

by Diana Yue