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 more animal stories

猴
Putonghua pronunciation: hou2
Cantonese pronunciation: hau4
Meanings: monkey

達爾文 (da2 er3 wen2 = “Darwin”-transliterated)'s 進化論 (jin4 hua4 lun4 = advance-transform-theory = theory of evolution) says man came from 猿 (yuan2, apes).

猴子 (hou2 zi0 = monkey diminutive = monkeys), 黑猩猩 (hei1 xing1 xing1 = black-chimpanzees) are intelligent. Chinese literature invented 孫悟空 (Sun1 Wu4 Kong1 = 美猴王 Mei3 Hou2 Wang2 = Beautiful-Monkey-King) who escorted Tripitaka to India to 取經 (qu3 jing1 = seek-Buddhist-sutras). Japanese movie-makers invented giant gorilla 金剛 (Jin1 Gang1 = King Kong).

沐猴而冠 (mu4 hou2 er2 guan4 = bathe-monkey-and-give-it-hat) describes ugly/cheap guy glorified by expensive clothes or impressive titles. 樹倒猢猻散 (shu4 dao3 hu2 sun1 shan4 = tree-fall-monkeys-disperse) means when rich/powerful house/institution collapses its dependents will desert it.

by Diana Yue