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

Zhù

Putonghua pronunciation: zhu1
Cantonese pronunciation: jue1
Meanings: swine, hog, pig

Zhù (radical 畜 shì = pig) is very early domesticated. In character 家 (jia1, home), pig lives under man’s 屋 (roof). Chinese often say 肉 (rou4, meat) for 豬肉 (zhu1 rou4 = pig-meat = pork). 豬油 (zhu1 you2 = pig-oil) = lard. 火腿 (huo3 tui3 = fire-leg) = ham.

“蠢豬!” (chun3 zhu1 = stupid-pig) is humiliating/facetious term. 猪狗不如 (zhu1 gou3 bu4 ru2 = pig-dog-not-equal = worse than pigs and dogs) describes morally despicable people or maltreatment of slaves.

人怕出名質怕壯 (ren2 pa4 chu1 ming2 zhu1 pa4 zhuang4 = human-fear-emerge-fame-pig-fear-strong) means fame invites attack, just as meaty pig invites slaughter. Novel Animal Farm’s Chinese translation is “肥豬王” (fei2 zhu1 wang2 = fat-pig-king).

by Diana Yue