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 passive waiting

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

兔 = 兔子 (tu4 zi0 = rabbit-diminutive = rabbit/hare). 動如脱兔 (dong4 ru2 tuo1 tu4 = move-resemble-escaped-rabbit) = energetic/dashing. 兔兒爺 (tu4 er0 ye2 = rabbit-diminutive-lord = rabbit-doll) is traditional Chinese idol/toy. 兔女郎 (tu4 nu3 lang2 = rabbit-woman/girl-lad) = Playboy magazine’s bunny girls.

兔死狐悲 (tu4 si3 hu2 bei1 = hare-dies-fox-sad) = mourn destruction/perishing of kindred spirit. 聰明人 猾兔三窟 (jiao3 tu4 san1 ku1 = sly-hare-three-holes = has multiple hideouts to avoid enemies). 兔死狗烹 (tu4 si3 gou3 peng1 = hare-dead-dog-cooked) describes cruel exploiter: lackey kills for boss, boss eliminates lackey.

守株待兔 (shou3 zhu1 dai4 tu4 = wait-by-stump-wait-for-hare) describes lazy/dumb/inflexible/passive person waiting for tiniest chance: a second rabbit killed bumping against tree-stump.

by Diana Yue