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 dragons

恐
Putonghua pronunciation: kong2
Cantonese pronunciation: hung4
Meanings: fear, terror

恐 = 恐懼 (kong3 ju4 = fear-fear). “我恐怕 ...” (wo2 kong3 pa4 = I-fear-fear) = “I’m afraid ...”
恐嚇 (kong3 xia4 = fear-terrorize) = threaten. 恐怖主義者 (kong3 bu4 zhu3 yi4 zhe3 = terror-main-meaning-person = terrorists) create 恐慌 (kong3 huang1 = fear-fear = panic), necessitating 反恐 (fan2 kong3 = anti-terrorism) measures.

Dinosaurs leave 化石 (hua4 shi2 = melted/transformed-stones = fossils). To Hongkong parents, kids are “化骨龍” (hua4 gu3 long2 = melt-bones-dragons — they devour/consume their parents to the bones!)

by Diana Yue