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 fox borrowing tiger's majesty

狐.Putonghua pronunciation: hu2
Cantonese pronunciation: woo4
Meanings: fox

狐 (radical 犭 = 犬 qūan3, dog) = 狐狸 (hu2 li2 = fox-badger = fox). Foxes are 聰明 (cong1 ming2 = sharp-eared-sharp-eyed = intelligent), 狡猾 (jiao3 hua2 = sly-treacherous = cunning).

銀狐 (yin2 hu2 = silver-foxes) have prized fur. In Chinese legends, 狐仙 (hu2 xian1 = fox-fairies) appear as lovely women who use 狐媚 (hu2 mei2 = foxy-charm/seduction) to lure/bewitch men. Modern term 狐狸精 (hu2 li2 jing1 = fox-demon) means women who lure/snatch others’ husbands.

Fox/thief 偷雞摸狗 (tou1 ji1 mo1 gou3 = steal-chicken-touch-dog = steals/snatches small animals/things). Detective’s 狐疑 (hu2 yi2 = fox-suspicious = suspicion) makes undercover criminal 露出狐狸尾巴 (lu4 chu1 hu2 li2 wei3 ba1 = shows-out-fox’s-tail = expose bad/criminal intent/identify).

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