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 borrow tiger’s majesty

假
Putonghua pronunciation: jia3
Cantonese pronunciation: ga2
Meanings: untrue, false, imaginary, imitation, borrow, use, assume

假 (假 = 人 ren2, person + 假 jia3, borrowed) = 虚假 (xü1 jia3 = unreal—false): 假名 (jia3 ming2 = false-name/pseudonym), 假話 (jia3 hua4 = false-words = lies), 假設 (jia3 she4 = false-establish = assumption/hypothesis), 假仁假義 (jia3 ren2 jia3 yi4 = false-kind—false—righteous = hypocrisy).

Crook 假扮 (jia3 ban4 = falsely—pretends—to-be) jeweller, sells 假貨 (jia3 huo4 = faked—goods/items). Fools 真假不分 (zhen1 jia3 bu4 fen1 = real—false—no—distinguish = can’t tell truth from falsehood).

If budget control 假手於人 (jia3 shou3 yü1 ren2 = borrow/lend-hand—to-others = is delegated to others), cheats can 假借 (jia3 jie4 = dishonestly—borrow/use) false pretexts to 假公濟私 (jia3 gong1 ji4 si1 = borrow—official—benefit—private = spend public money/resources on themselves).

by Diana Yue