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

Putonghua pronunciation: hu3
Cantonese pronunciation: foo2
Meanings: tiger

虎 (＝老虎 lao2 hu3 = old-tiger) is 百獸之王 (bai2 shou4 zhi1 wang2 = hundred-beasts-'s-king = king of beasts). 東北虎 (dong1 bei3 hu3 = east-north-tiger) = Manchurian tiger.

Nobody dares 抒虎鬚 (luo1 hu3 xü1 = stroke-tiger’s-whiskers = irritate/taunt powerful bully). 虎口餘生 (hu3 kou3 yu2 sheng1 = tiger-mouth-remain-alive) means narrowly escaping from peril.

Chinese call tiger “山君” (shan1 jün1 = mountain’s-ruler). Ministers know 伴君如伴虎 (ban4 jün1 ru2 ban4 hu3 = accompany-ruler-resembles-accompany-tiger = serving a tyrant closely is like serving a tiger — it’s dangerous/scary! 與虎謀皮 (yu2 hu3 mou2 pi2 = to-tiger-ask-for-skin) means asking a dangerous person to cede/sell to you his close interests — it’s naïve/dangerous and can’t be done!

by Diana Yue