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 blind groping

象
Putonghua pronunciation: xiang4  
Cantonese pronunciation: jeung6  
Meanings: appearance, shape, image, elephant

象 = 形象 (xing2 xiang4 = shape-image/style). 印象 (yin4 xiang4 = seal/imprint-image) = impression. 象棋 (xiang4 qi2 = elephant-chess = Chinese chess) has chess-piece 象 (xiang4 = opponent's 相 xiang4, minister).

Animal 象 is fondly called 大笨象 (da4 ben4 xiang4 = big-clumsy/stupid-elephant). 象拔 (xiang4 ba2 = elephant-pull) = elephant's nose. Western idiom 白象 (bai2 xiang4 = white-elephant) means cumbersome/useless asset/burden. Chinese saying 瞎子摸象 (xia1 zi0 mo1 xiang4 = blind-person-touch/feel-elephant = blind person/people touching/feeling elephant's body to guess animal's appearance) means blind/limited observation cannot give you the real/full picture.

Poachers want 象牙 (xiang4 ya2 = elephant's-teeth/tusks = ivory), hence 象以齒焚身 (xiang4 yi3 chi3 fen2 shen1 = elephant-because-of-tusks-burnt-body = possession of enviable assets/talents causes possessor's destruction).

by Diana Yue