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: wei1
Cantonese pronunciation: wai1
Meanings: power, prestige, ferocity, authority, majestic air

威 (radical 戈 ge1, spear/lance) means martial power/authority. Armored knight looks 威風 (wei1 feng1 = fierce-wind = fierce/imposing). Strong leader has 威望 (wei1 wang4 = power-reputation = prestige/authority). Physicist is 權威 (quan2 wei1 = strong-authority) on A-bomb’s 威力 (wei1 li4 = fierce-power = force).

Angry crowd stages 示威 (shi4 wei1 = show-strength = demonstration). Criminal gangs 威逼利誘 (wei1 bi1 li4 you3 = power-force-gain-lure = use force/money) to recruit members. New boss gives subordinates 下馬威 (xia4 ma3 wei1 = descend-horse-show-power = a clear show of authority).

Encouraged by superpower, small state狐假虎威 (hu2 jia3 hu3 wei1 = fox-borrow-tiger’s-majesty = flaunts its backer's strength), 耀武揚威 (yao4 wu3 yang2 wei1 = brandish-weapon-flaunt-power = flexes muscles).

by Diana Yue