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.

Putonghua pronunciation: xiong1
Cantonese pronunciation: hung1
Meanings: fierce, ferocious, aggressive, violent, attacker, crime of violence

Ideogram 兇 suggests 凶 (xiong1, ill-luck/mishap). 兇猛 (xiong1 meng3 = fierce-powerful) tiger 凶性大發 (xiong1 xing4 da4 fa1 = fierce-nature-big-burst = turns savage/ferocious/aggressive). Hiker missing on 凶險 (xiong1 xian3 = ill-luck-danger = dangerous) jungle-trek 凶多吉少 (xiong1 duo1 ji2 shao3 = ill-luck-many-luck-little = probably got hurt/killed).

Wolves/bullies are 兇惡 (xiong1 e4 = fierce-hostile/bad/evil). Despots/mafia are 窮兇極惡 (qiong2 xiong1 ji2 e4 = exhaust-fierce-ultimate-hostile/bad/evil). Hen-pecked husband fears wife's 兇巴巴 (xiong1 ba1 ba0 = fierce-ah-ah = fierce/scary-looking) expression.

Conspirators 買兇殺人 (mai3 xiong1 sha1 ren2 = buy/hire-killer/assassin-to-kill-someone). 兇手 (xiong1 shou3 = violent-crime-hand = attacker/killer) 行兇 (xing2 xiong1 = commits-violent-crime). 元兇 (yuan2 xiong1 = primary-wrongdoer/culprit) is aided by 幫兇 (bang1 xiong1 = help-wrongdoer/culprit = abettor).

by Diana Yue