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 The Water Margin

豹 (radical 豸 zhi4, animal/insect) = leopard: 金錢豹 (jin1 qian2 bao4 = gold-coin-leopard = 花豹 hua1 bao4 = flower/spotted-leopard), 黑豹 (hei1 bao4 = black-leopard = panther), 獵豹 (lie4 bao4 = hunting-leopard = cheetah), 雪豹 (xue3 bao4 = snow-leopard).

豹隱 (bao4 yin3 = leopard-vanish) describes veteran withdrawn from publicity. 豹死留皮 (bao4 shi3 liu2 pi2 = leopard-dies-leaves-skin) = leaving name/legacy after exiting career.

In The Water Margin, 林沖 (Lin2 Chong1), nicknamed 豹子頭 (bao4 zi0 tou2 = leopard-diminutive-head = leopard-head), was head of the royal guards but was 陷害 (xian4 hai4 = trap-harm = framed), 充軍 (chong1 jün1 = fill-army = exiled and sent into the army). After being rescued, he joined the 108 bandits.

by Diana Yue