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 hunting

伏
Putonghua pronunciation: fu2
Cantonese pronunciation: fuk6
Meanings: lie prostrate, crouch, bend, yield, lurk, ambush, subdue, conquer

Ideogram 伏 ( Paths-人 ren2, person + 犬 qūan3, dog) indicates person crouching/bending, dog-like: 伏地 (fu2 di4 = crouch-on-ground), 伏案 (fu2 an4 = crouch-on-desk, writing/napping). Waves/noises 此起彼伏 (ci3 qi3 bi3 fu2 = this-rise-that-drop = rise and fall).

Spy 埋伏 (mai2 fu2 = bury-crouch = lurks/hides). 伏兵 (fu2 bing1 = hiding-soldiers) 伏擊 (fu2 jī1 = crouch-attack = ambush) enemy. Rash attackers 中伏 (zhòng4 fu2 = get-hit-by-ambush). Symptoms surface after disease’s 潜伏期 (qián2 fu2 qi1 = dive-hide-period = latent/incubation period).

Exorciser 伏魔 (fu2 mo1 = subdues-devils/demons). Criminal 伏法 (fu2 fa3 = subdued-law = is arrested/convicted). 不甘雌伏 (bu4 gan1 ci2 fu2 = un-willing-female-crouch/submit) describes subdued woman/person keen to rise again, perform, take charge.

by Diana Yue