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 myth of Prometheus

Putonghua pronunciation: tou1
Cantonese pronunciation: tau1
Meanings: steal

偷 = 盜 (dao4, rob/steal). 小偷 (xiao3 tou1 = petty-thief) 偷錢 (tou1 qian2 = steals-money). 偷懶 (tou1 lan3 = steal-lazy) = lazing around, ignoring work rule/target. Love-hotels are for 偷情 (tou1 qing2 = steal~love = secret lovers’ rendez-vous).

Adverb 偷偷 (tou1 tou1 = steal-steal) = steal~thilly/without permission: 偷服 (tou1 chi1 = steal~intake = secretly take) banned drugs, 偷襲 (tou1 xi2 = steal~attack = ambush). 偷聽器 (tou1 ting4 qi4 = steal-listen~instrument) = bugging device. 偷渡客 (tou1 du4 ke4 = steal~cross~guest) = illegal immigrant.

希臘神話 (Xi1 La4 shen2 hua4 = “Greece”-transliterated-god~talk = Greek myth) tells how 普羅米修士 (Pu3 Luo2 Mi3 Xiu1 Shi4 = “Prometheus”-transliterated) 偷火 (tou1 huo3 = stole~fire) from the gods.

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