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

**盗**

Putonghua pronunciation: dao4
Cantonese pronunciation: do6
Meanings: robber, bandit

Verb 盜 = 盜竊 (dao4 qie4 = rob-steal), 盜取 (da4 qü3 = steal-take). 盜用公款 (dao4 yong4 gong1 kuan3 = steal-use-public-funds) = commit embezzlement.


The Water Margin praised 梁山泊 (liang2 shan1 bo1 = Liang-Mountain-Marsh)'s 一百零八條好漢 (yi1 bai2 ling2 ba1 tiao2 hao3 han4 = one-hundred-zero-eight-lines-good-men = 108 good/valiant men/fighters). In old China it was 禁書 (jin4 shu1 = banned-book) because it 質盜 (hui4 dao4 = instruct/teach-robber = taught people to become robbers).

by Diana Yue