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 presidential elections

驴
Putonghua pronunciation: lu2
Cantonese pronunciation: loh3
Meanings: donkey, ass

驴 (radical 马 ma3, horse) is cousin of 马 (ma3, horse), 驹 (luo2, mule). 驴子 (lù2 zi0 = donkey-diminutive) = donkey: 野驴 (ye3 lü2 = wild-ass), 家驴 (jia1 lü2 = home-ass = bred donkey), 笨驴 (ben4 lü2 = stupid-ass/person).

Chinese villagers keep 毛驴 (mao2 lü2 = hairy-donkey = small donkeys) for 拉车 (la1 che1 = pulling-carts), 推磨 (tui1 mo2 = pushing-mill-stone). 驴肉 (lü2 rou4 = donkey-meat) is edible. Idiom 非驴非马 (fei1 lü2 fei1 ma3 = not-donkey-not-horse) describes something not done/imitated properly, i.e. neither here nor there.

驴 is mascot of 民主党 (Min2 Zhu3 Dang3 = people-master-party = the Democratic Party). 漫画 (man4 hua4 = random-picture = cartoon) shows 象 (xiang4, elephant/Republicans), 驴 (lü2, donkey/Democrats) campaigning.

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