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 corruption

贪 (radical 貝 bei4 = sea-shell/money)
Putonghua pronunciation: tan1
Cantonese pronunciation: taam1
Meanings: love excessively, covet, greed

Motive 贪 is 贪念 (tan1 nian4 = greedy-thought). Lazy pigs 贪吃 贪睡 (tan1 chi4 tan1 shui4 = love-eat-love-sleep). 贪心 (tan1 xin1 = greed-heart = greedy) people always want more. The Ten Commandments say: “不可贪婪!” (bu4 ke3 tan1 lan2 = no-permit-greed-greed = “Thou shalt not covet!”)

Misers 貪錢 (tan1 qian2 = greed-money = want/love money).
Cowards 貪生怕死 (tan1 sheng1 pa4 si3 = covet-life-fear-death = fear danger/risk). The term 貪污 (tan1 wu1 = greed-dirt = corruption) comes from 貪官污吏 (tan1 guan1 wu1 li4 = greedy-officials-dirty-clerks = corrupt officials).

Character 贪 and character 貧 (pin2, poverty) look alike, hence idiom 貪字變貧 (tan1 xi4 bian4 pin2 = greed-character-change-to-poverty). Greed can turn into poverty!

by Diana Yue