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 prodigal son

Putonghua pronunciation: chong3
Cantonese pronunciation: chung2
Meanings: love, being fond of, bestowing special favor

Character 龍 shows 亖 (= roof/shelter) + 龍 (long2, dragon, symbol of supremacy). 龍 = 寵愛 (chong3 ai4 = favor-love): 寵物 (chong3 wu4 = favored-thing = pet), 寵妾 (chong3 qie4 = favorite-concubine). Celebrities are media’s 寵兒 (chong3 er2 = favorite-child = favorites with the media).

Kids of indulgent parents get 寵壞 (chong3 wai4 = love-bad = spoil it). After regime change, minister who once 得寵 (de2 chong3 = gained/was-in-favor) 失寵 (shi1 chong3 = loses-favor = goes out of favor).

Man of integrity 寵辱不驚 (chong3 ru3 bu4 jing1 = favor-insult-not-fear = remains calm despite heaping of honors or insults). Praised/invited person exclaims, “受寵若驚!” (shou4 chong3 ruo4 jing1 = receive-favor-resemble-stunned = “I’m overwhelmed by your compliment/kindness!”)

by Diana Yue