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 stockmarket gambling

胆 膽
Cantonese pronunciation: daam2
Meanings: gall bladder, guts, daring, boldness

胆 = 膽量 dan3 liang4 = gall-bladder-capacity) means guts/daring. 膽大包天 (da3 da4 bao1 tian1 = gall-bladder-big-enfold-sky) describes over-greedy/ambitious person. 膽小如鼠 (dan3 xiao3 ru2 shu3 = gall-bladder-small-resemble-mouse) = very timid.

Rebuke “你膽敢...” (ni3 dan3 gan3 = you-bold-dare... = “How dare you...” 肝膽相照 (gan1 dan3 xiang1 zha04 = liver-gall-bladder-mutual-reflect) describes friends sharing spiritual bond.

Smart speculators have 膽色 (dan3 se1 = guts-color = mettle), 膽大心細 (dan3 da4 xin1 xi4 = gall-bladder-big-heart/mind-small = think bold, plan/act meticulously/cautiously), 藝高人膽大 (yi4 gao1 ren2 dan3 da4 = art-high-person-gall-bladder-big = do daring things with sophisticated/superb skills). However, many 嚇破膽 (xia1 po4 dan2 = scared-break-gall-bladder = are scared stiff) when market plunges.

by Diana Yue