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 abusive language

鬼
Putonghua pronunciation: gui3
Cantonese pronunciation: gwai3
Meaning: ghost, phantom, spook, demon, apparition, devil

鬼 (gui3, from 回 gui1, return) means 鬼魂 (gui3 hun2 = ghost/phantom/spook-spirit). Ancients 拜鬼神 (bai4 gui3 shen2 = worship-spirits-gods), fear 鬼怪 (gui3 gual4 = ghosts-demons). 鬼 has scary/bad image. 吊死鬼 (dia0 si3 gui3 = hang-dead-ghost = hanged man turned into ghost). 酒鬼 (jiu3 gui3 = liquor/wine-ghost) = alcoholic. 色鬼 (se1 gui3 = color/woman-ghost) = womanizer. 懶鬼 (lan3 gui3 = lazy-ghost) = lazybone. 死鬼 (si3 gui3 = dead-ghost) refers to anyone hated/disliked. However, 扮鬼臉 (ban4 gui3 lian3 = pretend-ghost-face) means make funny face.

Traitor 心裡有鬼 (xin1 li3 you3 gui3 = heart-interior-has-ghost = hides malice), 說鬼話 (shuo1 gui3 hua4 = say-ghost-speech = talks lies/nonsense), 搞鬼 (gao3 gui3 = stir-ghost = makes trouble).

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