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 borrowing arrows

缺

Putonghua pronunciation: que1
Cantonese pronunciation: kuet3
Meanings: lack

缺 = 缺少 (que1 shao3 = lack~short-of). Poor people 缺钱 (que1 qian3 = lack~money). High-altitude regions 缺氧 (que1 yang3 = lack~oxygen). 缺點 (que1 dian3 = lack~point) = weakness/flaw. 缺陷 (que1 xian4 = lack~cave-in) = body’s/scheme’s defect.

Slanderers/cheats are 缺德 (que1 de2 = lack~virtue = mean/unkind). 月圆月缺 (yue4 yuan2 yue4 que1 = moon-round~moon~incomplete) = moon’s wax and wane. 寧缺毋濫 (ning2 que1 wu2 lan4 = prefer-lack~don’t~overflow) = “Too few rather than too many” philosophy.

In ancient China’s三國 (san1 guo2 = Three-Kingdoms) period (3rd century A.D.), 蜀國 (Shu2 guo2 = Shu-Kingdom) and 吳國 (Wu2 guo2 = Wu-Kingdom) prepared for big battle against 魏國 (Wei4 guo2 = Wei-Kingdom), but 缺箭 (que1 jian4 = lacked-arrows).

by Diana Yue