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

揭 (radical 手 = hand, shou3 = hand)
Putonghua pronunciation: jie1
Cantonese pronunciation: kit3
Meanings: lift off, unveil, expose, raise high

揭 = lift/uncover with hand: 揭開 (jie1 kai1 = flip-open = open) book, 揭下 (jie1 xia4 = take-down) sticker. Groom 揭起 (jie1 qi3 = lifts-up) bride’s veil. Winners rejoice when results 揭曉 (jie1 xiao3 = lift-dawn/know = are known).

Corrupt officials 揭蓋子 (wu3 gai4 zi0 = cover-lid-diminutive = cover up secrets/misdeeds). Investigators 揭穿 (jie1 chuan1 = lift-pierce = smash) lies, 揭發隱私 (jie1 fa1 yin3 si1 = lift-rise-hidden-private = disclose personal secrets), 揭露 (jie1 lu4 = lift-show = expose) scandal, 揭示 (jie1 shi4 = lift-reveal) the real picture.

Rebels 揭竿而起 (jie1 gan1 er2 qi3 = lift/erect-flag's-bamboo-pole-and-rise = launch uprising), 揭帽致敬 (jie1 mao4 zhi4 jing4 = lift-hat-show-respect) = hats off in adoration.

by Diana Yue