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 king planning revenge

臥
Putonghua pronunciation: wo4 Cantonese pronunciation: ngoh6
Meanings: lie down

臥 is lying/sleeping posture: 睡臥 (shui4 wo4 = sleep-lying-down), 臥床 (wo4 chuang2 = lie-in-bed), 臥室 (wo4 shi1 = lying-room = bedroom). 側臥 (ze4 wo4 = side-lie) = lie on body’s side. 仰臥 (yang3 wo4 = face-up-lie) = lie on body’s back. Patients 臥病 (wo4 bing4 = lie-ill in bed).

臥軌 (wo4 gui3 = lie-on-railway-track) is a suicidal act. 臥底 (wo4 di3 = lie-under) = mole. 臥佛 (wo4 fo2 = sleeping-Buddha) image shows Buddha in 涅槃 (nie4 pan2 = “Nirvana”-transliterated).

Ancient neighboring kingdoms 吳國 (Wu2 guo2 = Wu-kingdom), 越國 (Yue4 guo2 = Yue-kingdom) were old enemies. Each ruler felt 坐臥不安 (zuo4 wo4 bu4 an1 = sitting-lying-not-comfortable = thoroughly uneasy/threatened) when the other kingdom grew powerful.

by Diana Yue