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 canines

狐 (radical 犭 = 犬 qūan3, dog) = 狐狸 (hu2 li2 = fox-badger = fox). Foxes are狡猾 (jiao3 hua2 = sly-treacherous = sly/cunning), hence狐疑 (hu2 yi2 = fox-like=suspicious),狐媚 (hu2 mei2 = fox-like-luring/seductive).狐步 (hu2 bu4 = fox-steps) = fox trot.

Chinese legends feature狐仙 (hu2 xian1 = fox-fairies), hence狐狸精 (hu2 li2 jing1 = fox-demons) means charmer snatching somebody else’s husband.狐群狗黨 (hu2 qún2 gou3 dang3 = foxes-group-dogs-gang) = villain’s evil/lawless associates.露出狐狸尾巴 (lu4 chu1 hu2 li2 wei3 ba1 = show-out-fox’s-tail) describes villain’s real evil intent leaked/exposed.

兔死狐悲 (tu4 si3 hu2 bei1 = hare-dies-fox-grieves) describes tragic empathy: one victim’s ruin is mourned by another anticipating similar fate.

by Diana Yue