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

膽 (dān3) Cantonese pronunciation: daam2
Meanings: gall-bladder

膽 (dān3) nang2 = gall-bladder) has 膽汁 (dān3 zhi1 = gall-juice = bile), 膽石 (dān3 shi2 = gall-stones). Chinese believe eating 蟒膽 (she2 dān3 = snake’s gall-bladder) boosts body energy.

膽大 (dān3 da4 = gall-bladder-big) = brave. 膽小 (dān3 xiao3 = gall-bladder-small) = timid. 膽色 (dān3 se1 = gall-color) = bravery/mettle. However, 色膽包天 (se1 dān3 bao1 tian1 = lust-for-women-gall-bladder-wrap-sky) describes womanizer’s outrageous act.

Yüe’s king planned 報仇 (bào4 chou2 = repay-wrong = revenge), 臥薪嘗膽 (wo4 xin1 chang2 dān3 = slept-on-firewood-tasted-gall-bladder), used 忠肝義膽 (zhong1 gan1 yi4 dān3 = loyal-liver-righteous-gall = loyal) ministers, offered beauty 西施 (Xi1 Shi1) to Wu’s king, finally 復國 (fù2 guo2 = resume/revive-state = re-established sovereign kingdom).

by Diana Yue