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 Chief Executive Election

豬 (zhū)  Cantonese pronunciation: jue1
Meanings: pig, hog, swine

豬 (radical 畜 shì, pig) is one of twelve 生肖 (shēng xiào = born-resemble = animal signs) of the twelve-year-rotating Chinese Zodiac. Born in 豬年 (zhū nián = pig-year), you 屬猪 (shū zhū = belong-to-pig = have pig's attributes).

Chinese word 肉 (ròu, meat) means 豬肉 (zhū ròu = pig-meat = pork): 肥肉 (feī ròu = fatty-pork), 燒肉 (shāo ròu = burnt/roasted-pork). 豬牛羊 (zhū niú yáng = pig-cow-sheep) are 三牲 (sān shēng = three-sacrificial-animals) in ancient China.

Pigs are personifications: 蠢豬 (chūn zhū = stupid-pigs/people), 懶豬 (lán zhū = lazy-pigs/people). Novel Journey to the West describes Monk Tripitaka escorted by 朱八戒 (zhū bā jì = pig-eight-commandments), a clumsy pig-fairy, and others to seek Buddhist scriptures.

by Diana Yue