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

狼
Putonghua pronunciation: lang2
Cantonese pronunciation: long4
Meanings: wolf

狼 (radical 犭 = 犬 qūan3, dog) is character 狼 (hen3, pity-less) plus a dot, so 狼 is 兇狼 (xiong1 hen3 = fierce-pity-less = fierce/violent). Sheep fear 狼嗥 (lang2 hao2 = wolf’s-howling). 狼入 (lang2 ren2 = wolf-human) = werewolf.

Wolves are personifications. 狼心狗肺 (lang2 xin1 gou3 fei4 = wolf-heart-dog-lungs) describes cruel/ungrateful people. 豺狼當道 (cai2 lang2 dang1 dao4 = small-wolf-wolf-astride-road) = bad/cruel people are in power. 色狼 (se1 lang2 = color/women-wolf) = man who harasses/molests women.

狼 are highly intelligent. 狼群 (lang2 qún2 = wolf-crowd = pack of wolves) has 領袖 (ling3 xiù4 = collar-sleeve = leader), hunt 獵物 (lie4 wù4 = hunt-object = prey) together. Nomadic Mongols worship 狼圖騰 (lang2 tu2 teng2 = wolf-totem).

by Diana Yue