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 adultery

 oggi Putonghua pronunciation: jian1
 Cantonese pronunciation: gaan1
 Meanings: adultery, rape

Ideogram 被 (showing three 被 nü3, female/girl/woman) means illicit sex, e.g. 強姦 (qiang2 jian1), also written as 強奸 (qiang2 jian1), = forced-rape. (But 奸 also means sly/evil, e.g. 奸賊 jian1 zei2 = cunning/evil-thief). 強姦民意 (qiang2 jian1 min2 yi4 = forced-rape-people’s-opinion) describes irresponsible bureaucrats who deliberately distort prevailing public opinion.

被 (mi2 jian1 = hypnotic-drug-rape) = drug and rape someone (drug-facilitated sexual assault). 被污 (jian1 wu1 = rape-dirty/stain) means rape a woman/處女 (chu4 nü3 = reside/home-bound-girl = virgin), staining/breaking her purity/virginity. 雞姦 (ji1 jian1 = chicken-rape) = sodomy.

奸夫淫婦 (jian1 fu1 yin2 fu4 = adulterous-man-lascivious-woman = illicit couple) 通姦 (tong1 jian1 = connect-adultery = have adulterous affair). Tabloids expose 妓情 (jian1 qing2 = adulterous-love-affair).

by Diana Yue