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

偷
Putonghua pronunciation: tou1
Cantonese pronunciation: tau1
Meanings: steal

偷 (偷人 ren2, man + 俞 yu2, shortcut) suggests theft/stealth/secret; 偷聽 (tou1 ting4 = steal/secretly-listen = bugging), 偷竊 (tou1 qie4 = steal-theft), 偷盜 (tou1 dao4 = steal-rob). 小偷 (xia03 tou1 = small-thief) 偷錢 (tou1 qian2 = steals-money).

偷渡 (tou1 du4 = steal-crossing) = cross border illegally. 偷襲 (tou1 xiai2 = steal-attack) = ambush. 偷情 (tou1 tou1 mol mol = steal-steal-feel/finger = secretly/stealthily) 偷情 (tou1 qing2 = steal-love = have secret rendezvous).

Chinese say 妻不如妾, 妾不如妓, 妓不如偷 (qi1 bu4 ru2 qie4, qie4 bu4 ru2 ji4, ji4 bu4 ru2 tou1 = wife-can't-compete-with-concubine, concubine-can't-compete-with-prostitute, prostitute-can't-compete-with-steal), i.e. Pleasure-wise, secret/hushed sex affair by far surpasses prostitute/concubine/wife.

by Diana Yue