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 tigers

Putonghua pronunciation: hu3
Cantonese pronunciation: foo2
Meanings: tiger

獅 (shi1, lions) 虎, 豹 (bao4, leopards) are 貓科 (mao1 ke1 = cat-category = felines). Tigers, reverently called “山君” (shan1 jun1 = mountain-ruler/king), are loners: 一山不容二虎 (yi1 shan1 bu4 rong2 er4 hu3 = one-mountain-no-allow-two-tigers = two tigers/leaders cannot co-exist in one mountain/territory).

Tigers are powerful/dangerous. 與虎謀皮 (yu2 hu3 mou2 pi2 = with-tiger-contemplate-skin = asking a tiger for its skin) is naive; 放虎歸山 (fang4 hu3 gui1 shan1 = release-tiger-return-mountain = setting free someone potentially dangerous) is unwise.

Husbands fear 雌老虎 (ci2 lao2 hu3 = female-old/senior-tiger = fierce wives). Ministers/aides know 伴君如伴虎 (ban4 jun1 ru2 ban4 hu3 = accompany-ruler-remembers-accompany-tiger = serving a tyrannical king/boss is a scary/dangerous thing).

by Diana Yue