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

猛 (meng3)
Cantonese pronunciation: maang5
Meanings: fierce, strong, stunning

猛 = 兇猛 (xiong1 meng3 = fierce-ferocious). 猛虎 (meng2 hu3 = fierce-tigers) are 猛獸 (meng3 shou4 = fierce-beasts). 勇猛 (yong2 meng3 = brave-fierce) describes fighters/pugilists/athletes. 猛將如雲 (meng3 jiang4 ru2 yun2 = fierce-generals-resemble-clouds) describes strong army with outstanding leaders/fighters or all-star casts/teams.

猛烈 (meng3 lie4 = stunning-fierce) describes powerful sun/winds/fires/liquors. Alcoholics 猛飲 (meng2 yin3 = fierce-drink = drink ferociously). With hard training, pianist’s skill 突飛猛進 (tu1 fei1 meng3 jin4 = sudden-fly-stunning-progress = improves spectacularly).

Tigers killed a woman’s entire family, but she remained where she lived because the government there was not oppressive. Hence Confucius’ comment “苛政猛於虎!” (ke1 zheng4 meng3 yu2 hu3 = harsh-rule/administration-fierce-than-tiger): “Oppressive governments are worse than tigers!”

by Diana Yue