Character Builder

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 more the sky

Putonghua pronunciation: tian1
Cantonese pronunciation: tin1
Meanings: sky, heaven, nature

Character 天 shows sky over man’s head. Birds/planes fly in 天上 (tian1 shang4 = sky-above = 天空 tian1 kong1 = sky-space = sky). 走遍天下 (zou3 pian4 tian1 xia4 = run-all-over-sky-below) = traveling everywhere.

Man imagines 天堂 (tian1 tang2 = heaven-hall = Paradise), 天神 (tian1 shen2 = heavenly-gods), 天使 (tian1 shi4 = heaven’s-messengers = angels). Children are 天真可愛 (tian1 zhen1 ke3 ai4 = heaven/nature-true-can-love = innocent and sweet/lovable). 小天地 (xiao3 tian1 di4 = little-heaven-earth = little world/home/center) offers quiet/privacy.

物競天擇 (wu4 jing4 tian1 ze2 = things-compete-nature-selects) = survival of the fittest. 無法無天 (wu2 fa3 wu2 tian1 = without-law-without-heaven) describes outrageous criminals who violate 天理 (tian1 li3 = heaven’s-reason = justice).

by Diana Yue