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 Buddha’s sacrifice for eagle and dove

鷹 (radical 鳥 niao3, bird) = 老鷹 (lao3 ying1 = old-eagle) = eagle. 鷹雛 (ying1 chu2 = eagle-chick/eaglet) inhabits 鷹巢 (ying1 chao2 = eagle’s-nest), becomes 雄鷹 (xiong2 ying1 = mighty-eagle). Caucasians have 深目鷹鼻 (shen1 mu4 ying1 bi2 = deep-set-eyes-eagle/hooked-noses).

禿鷹 (tu1 ying1 = bald-eagle = vultures/condors), 貓頭鷹 (mao1 tou2 ying1 = cat-head-eagle = owls) capture 兔 (tu4, rabbits), 鴿 (gel1, pigeons), 蛇 (she2, snakes) with鷹爪 (ying1 zhao3 = eagles’ claws). Hunter breeds 獵鷹 (lie4 ying1 = hunting-eagle = hawks/falcons). Tyrants employ 鷹犬 (ying1 quan3 = hawks-hounds = running-dogs).

鷹擊長空 (ying1 ji1 chang2 kong1 = eagle-beat-long-stretching-sky) describes beautiful sight of soaring/gliding eagle flapping wings. 鷹派 (ying1 pai4 = eagle-sect) = Americanism “war hawks”.

Putonghua pronunciation: ying1
Cantonese pronunciation: ying1
Meanings: eagle, hawk

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