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 \ 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

Putonghua pronunciation: ge1
Cantonese pronunciation: gap3
Meanings: pigeon, dove, squab

鴿 (radical 鳥 niao3, bird) = 鴿子 (ge1 zi0 = dove-diminutive = dove). Army used 信鴿 (xin4 ge1 = letter/messenger-pigeons). Chinese restaurants serve 燒乳鴿 (shao1 ru3 ge1 = roast-milk-pigeon = roast baby squabs).

鴿 symbolizes 和平 (he2 ping2 = harmony-calm = peace), 友誼 (you3 yi2 = friend-ship), 愛 (ai4, love). As the Flood ebbed, dove brought 橄欖枝 (gan3 lan3 zhi1 = olive-branch) to 挪亞 (Nuo2 Ya4 = “Noah”-transliterated)'s 方舟 (fang1 zhou1 = square-boat = ark). Dove also symbolizes Christianity's 聖靈 (sheng1 ling2 = the Holy-Spirit). La Paloma (The Dove) is an Italian 情歌 (qing2 ge1 = love-song).

In politics, 鷹派 (ying1 pai4 = eagle-sect = hawks) opposes 鴿派 (ge1 pai4 = dove-sect = doves).

by Diana Yue