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

鳥

Putonghua pronunciation: niao3
Cantonese pronunciation: liu6
Meanings: bird

鳥, 禽 (qin2), 雀 (que1) all mean bird. 雛鳥 (chu2 niao3 = young-birds = fledglings) stay in 鳥巢 (niao3 chao2 = bird’s-nest). 家禽 (jia1 qin2 = home-bird) = domestic fowl.

Lovely woods have 鳥兒 (niao3 er2 = bird-diminutive = endearing term for birds), 鳥聲 (niao3 sheng1 = bird-sound = birdsong). Poets praise 雲雀 (yun2 que1 = cloud-bird = skylark), 翠鳥 (cui4 niao3 = emerald-green-bird = kingfisher). Children love 放紙鷗 (fang4 zhi3 yao2 = release-paper-kite = kite-flying).

飛鳥 (fei1 niao3 = flying-birds) cross the sky, take in 鳥瞰 (niao3 kan4 = bird’s-eye-view) of landscape below. 良禽擇木而棲 (liang2 qin2 ze2 mu4 er2 qi1 = good-bird-selects-wood/tree-to-perch) means decent/talented people will insist on serving respectable/well-established employer/organization.

by Diana Yue