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 felines

猫 (radical 丷 zhi4, long-spined mammal/insect) = cat/kitten. Shops/restaurants keep家猫 (jia1 mao1 = domestic-cats) because 貓捉老鼠 (mao1 zhu1 lao3 shu3 = cat-chase/catch-old-mouse = cats catch mice).

猫兒叫春 (mao1 er0 jiao4 chun1 = kitty-calling-springtime = cat in heat purring/mewing “喵喵” (miao1 miao1 sound). 雌貓 (yan1 mao1 = spaying/neutering-cat) targets 公貓 (gong1 mao1 = male/tom-cats). 母貓 (mu3 mao1 = female/tabby-cats) breed 小貓 (xia3 mao1 = little-cats/kittens).

Gem 貓眼石 (mao1 yan3 shi2 = cat’s-eye-stone) = opal. 小野貓 (xia3 ye3 mao1 = little-wild-cat) was movie-star Brigitte Bardot’s Chinese nickname. 夜貓子 (ye4 mao1 zí0 = nocturnal-cat) means貓頭鷹 (mao1 tou2 ying1 = cat-head-hawk = owl) or person who enjoys late-night activities/revelry.

by Diana Yue