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

**獅**

Putonghua pronunciation: **shi1**
Cantonese pronunciation: **si1**
Meanings: lion

大貓 (da4 mao1 = big-cats/felines) include 獅, 虎 (hu3, tigers), 豹 (bao4, leopards). 雄獅 (xiong2 shi1 = male-lions), 母獅 (mu3 shi1 = female-lionesses), 幼獅 (you4 shi1 = young-lions/cubs) form 獅群 (shi1 qün2 = lion-group = pack of lions).

獅 (radical 爪 = dog qūan3, dog) symbolizes regality/ferocity/power, is 萬獸之王 (wan4 shou4 zhi1 wāng2 = ten-thousand-beasts'-s-king = king of beasts). 獅子搏兔 (shi1 zi0 bo2 tu4 = lion-attack-hare) describes big power striking/overwhelming weak power. 河東獅吼 (he2 dong1 shi1 hōu3 = river-east-lion-roars) = fierce wife’s angry howl.

舞獅 (wu3 shi1 = dance-lion) = lion dance, men’s costumed kung-fu performance with percussion accompaniment. 獅子星座 (shi1 zi0 xǐng1 zuò4 = lion-diminutive-constellation-seat) = zodiac sign Leo.

by Diana Yue