Character Builder

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

爪

Putonghua pronunciation: zhao3
Cantonese pronunciation: jaau2
Meanings: claw, talon, paw, claw-like object

爪 (picturing downward-facing hand) means 鳥爪 (niao3 zhao3 = bird’s-feet/claws), 獸爪 (shou4 zhao3 = animals-paws/claws); 虎爪 (hu3 zhao3 = tiger’s-paw/talons), duck’s 蹼爪 (pu3 zhao3 = webbed-feet), 鷹爪 (ying1 zhao3 = eagle’s-claws), 利爪 (li4 zhao3 = sharp-claws/talons). 魔爪 (mo2 zhao3 = devil- claws) = crime-boss’s grip/control. 張牙舞爪 (zhang1 ya2 wu3 zhao3 = open-teeth-wave-claws) are snarling/menacing gestures.

貓爪 (mao1 zhao3 = cat’s-claws) leave 爪痕 (zhao3 hen2 = claw/scratching-marks) on furniture. 雪泥鴻爪 (xue3 ni2 hong2 zhao3 = snow-mud-wild-geese-claws = birds’ footprints on snow) means fragmentary traces/memories of by-gone travels.

爪 + 手 (shou3, hand) = verb 抓 (zhuai1, clutch/grab/scratch/control). Crime-boss sends 爪牙 (zhao3 ya2 = claws-teeth = lackeys/abettors) to 抓人 (zhuai1 ren2 = catch/hunt-down-people).

by Diana Yue