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 natural harmony

Putonghua pronunciation: tian1
Cantonese pronunciation: tin1
Meaning: sky, heaven, heavenly, serene, nature, day, ultimate authority

天 (strokes sheltering 人 ren2, man) means 天空 (tian1 kong1 = sky's-void/space = sky). Clouds in 天上 (tian1 shang4 = sky/heavens-above) affect 天氣 (tian1 qi1 = sky's-breath = the weather). Ancient Chinese 拜天 (bai4 tian1 = worshipped-Heaven). 天子 (tian1 zi3 = Heaven's-son having Heaven's mandate = emperor) ruled 天下 (tian1 xia4 = sky/heaven-under = the world).

天生 (tian1 sheng1 = heaven-born) = born with, natural. Simple-minded people are 天真 (tian1 zhen1 = heaven/nature-true/sincere = innocent/naïve). 天才 (tian1 cai2 = heaven-sent-talent) = genius. Sage advises: Follow your 天良 (tian1 liang2 = nature-bestowed-conscience), respect 天地萬物 (tian1 di4 wan4 wu4 = heaven-earth-ten-thousand-things = the world and all things in it). Don't defy 天理 (tian1 li3 = natural-reason/law/justice).

by Diana Yue