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 O.

This week: Words about Beijing

天
Putonghua pronunciation: tian1
Cantonese pronunciation: tin1
Meanings: sky, heaven, ultimate authority, nature, day

天 (strokes sheltering 人 ren2, man) means 天空 (tian1 kong1 = sky’s-void/space = sky), 天上 (tian1 shang4 = sky-above). 天氣 (tian1 qi4 = sky’s-breath) = weather.

Ancient Chinese 拜天 (bai4 tian1 = worshipped-Heaven). 天子 (tian1 zi3 = Heaven’s-son = emperor) had 天命 (tian1 ming4 = Heavenly-order/mandate) to rule 天下 (tian1 xia4 = sky/heaven-under = the world). Beijing’s 天壇 (tian1 tan2 = heavenly-altar = Altar/Temple of Heaven) is where emperors 祭天 (ji4 tian1 = offered-sacrifices-to-Heaven).

物競天擇 (wu4 jing4 tian1 ze2 = things-compete-nature-selects = survival of the fittest) ousts people without 天賦 (tian1 fu4 = heaven-bestowed-gifts/talents). Let's just 談天 (tan2 tian1 = talk-heaven = chat freely/light-heartedly), be 樂天 (le4 tian1 = joy/enjoy-heaven = cheerful/contented with fate)!

by Diana Yue