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 the ugly duckling

Putonghua pronunciation: tian1
Cantonese pronunciation: tin1
Meanings: sky, heaven, heavenly, serene, nature, day

Ideogram 天 indicates space above 人 (ren2, man), i.e. 天上 (tian1 shang4 = sky-above). Chinese 天子 (tian1 zi3 = heaven’s-son = emperor with heavenly mandate) ruled 天下 (tian1 xia4 = sky-below = the world), worshipped Heaven at 天壇 (tian1 tan2 = heaven-altar = Beijing’s Altar of Heaven).

天 has natural/heavenly/serene associations:天真 (tian1 zhen1 = natural-true = innocence/naivety), 天堂 (tian1 tang2 = heaven-hall = Paradise), 天神 (tian1 shen2 = heavenly-god/goddess), 天使 (tian1 shi4 = heaven’s-messenger = angel). 天蝎座 (tian1 xie1 zuo4 = heavenly-scorpion-seat) = zodiac sign Scorpio.

Paris sees Helen of Troy, 驚為天人 (jing1 wei2 tian1 ren2 = shock-as-heaven-person = is stunned by her serene beauty), exclam: 天哪 (tian1 na4 = heaven-ah = Oh/Dear Heavens!)

by Diana Yue