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 pine-trees

松 (radical 木 mu4, wood/tree) = 松樹 (song1 shu4 = pine-trees)
松 林 (song1 lin2 = pine-forest), 松 鈐 (song1 zhen1 = pine-needles). 松 濤 (song1 tao2 = pine-tree-waves) = soughing of wind rustling through pine-trees.

松 木 (song1 mu4 = pine-wood) contains 松脂 (song1 zhi1 = pine-fat = resin). 松 鼠 (song1 shu3 = pine-mouse/rate = squirrels) collect 松實 (song1 shi2 = pine-fruit/cones), eat 松 仁 (song1 ren2 = pine-nuts).

松 is 常綠樹 (chang2 lü4 shu4 = constant/ever-green-tree). In paintings depicting 松柏長青 (song1 bai3 chang2 qing1 = pine-cypress-forever-green = pine-cypress duo) and 松 鶴 延 年 (song1 he4 yan2 nian2 = pine-stork-extend-years = pine-stork duo), 古 松 (gu3 song1 = ancient/centuries-old-pine-trees) symbolize 長 壽 (chang2 shou4 = long-age = longevity).

by Diana Yue