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


松樹 (song1 shu4 = pine-trees) are handsome-looking: 樹幹高大 (shu4 gan4 gao1 da4 = tree-trunk-tall-big = have tall tree-trunks), 枝幹拗曲 (zhi1 gan4 gao1 yao3 qu3 = branches-trunks-gnarled-bent = have gnarled/crooked branches), 不落葉 (bu4 luo4 ye4 = no-drop/shed-leaves = are evergreen).

松竹梅 (song1 zhu2 mei2 = pine-tree-bamboo-tree-plum-tree) are praised as 歲寒三友 (sui4 han2 san1 you3 = year-cold-three-friends = trio of trees thriving in cold bleak winter).

by Diana Yue