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

Putonghua pronunciation: zhi1
Cantonese pronunciation: jii1
Meanings: fat

脂 (radical 月 = 肉 rou4, meat/flesh) = 脂肪 (zhi1 fang2 = fat-fat-at-waist = fat): 豬油 (zhu1 you2 = pig-fat = lard), 鵝脂 (e2 zhi1 = goose-fat). 羊脂白玉 (yang2 zhi1 bai2 yü4 = lamb's-fat-white-jade) is oily-white jade. Tyrant snatches 民脂民膏 (min2 zhi1 min2 gao1 = people's-fat-people’s-grease = people’s output/wealth).

松樹 (song1 shu4 = pine-tree)’s 樹皮 (shu4 pi2 = tree-skin/bark) excretes 松脂 (song1 zhi1 = pine-fat = resin). Painter dilutes oil-pigments with 松節油 (song1 jie2 you2 = pine-section-oil = turpentine). Violinist greases violin strings with 松香 (song1 xiang1 = resin).

琥珀 (hu3 po4 = jade-translucent = amber) is 松脂化石 (song1 zhi1 hua4 shi2 = pine-fat-transformed-rock = fossilized resin) containing insect remains.