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

青
Putonghua pronunciation: qin1
Cantonese pronunciation: ching
Meanings: blue, green

青 (生 sheng1, grow + 月 = 肉 rou4, flesh/body) = blue/green/youthfulness: 青天 (qing1 tian1 = blue-sky), 青山 (qing1 shan1 = bluish-green-hills), 青草 (qing1 cao3 = green-grass). 青絲 (qing1 si1 = blue/dark-silk) means beautiful black hair, poetically.

In 青春期 (qing1 Chun1 qi1 = green~spring-period = puberty/adolescence) some 青年人 (qing1 nian2 ren2 = green-years~people = young people) become 慣青 (fen4 qing1 = angry~youngsters). 青黃不接 (qing1 Huang2 bu4 jie1 = green-crop~yellow-crop~un~bridgeable) means grain shortage between two crops, or competence gap between two generations.

Pine-trees are 常緑樹 (chang2 lü4 shu4 = constant/ever~green~tree = evergreens), hence described as 青松 (qing1 song1 = green-pines). 長青樹 (chang2 qing1 shu4 = long-green-tree) means man/woman who looks perennially young.

by Diana Yue