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 studying and exams

科 (ke1)
Cantonese pronunciation: foh1
Meanings: subject, division

In feudal China, students attended 科舉 (ke1 ju3 = subject-raise/recommend = state-run examinations). 秀才 (xiu4 cai2 = sprouting-talent) = village-exam qualifiers. 舉人 (ju3 ren2 = erected-person) = city-exam qualifiers. Imperial capital exams selected 進士 (jin4 shi4 = progress-scholar), would-be bureau-crats, 畿元 (zhuang4 yuan2 = edict-supreme = year’s top scholar).

科目 (ke1 mu4 = subject-division) = scientific/curriculum divisions: 貓科 (mao1 ke1 = cat-division = felines), 地理科 (di4 li3 ke1 = earth-reason-subject = geography).

University freshmen 選科 (xuan3 ke1 = choose/elect-subjects): 文科 (wen2 ke1 = literary-subjects = humanities), 理科 (li3 ke1 = reason-subjects = sciences), 工科 (gong1 ke1 = work/engineer-subjects = engineering), 醫科 (yi1 ke1 = doctor-subject = medicine), 專科 (zhu1 ke1 = concentrate-subject = specializations).

by Diana Yue