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

材 (材 mu4, wood/tree + 才 cai2, talent) means usable log/material: 材料 (cai2 liao4 = materials-ingredients), 器材 (qi4 cai2 = utensils/equipment-materials), 女人的身躯 (shen1 cai2 = body-log = figure). Builders need 木材 (mu4 cai2 = wood-material), 鋼材 (gang4 cai2 = steel-material).

Forests supply 樹材 (shu4 cai2 = tree-materials = usable wood). Lumberjacks 伐材 (fa2 cai2 = chop-down-logs). 就地取材 (jiu4 di4 qü3 cai2 = adjust-to-land-take-material) = use whatever is available there and then.


by Diana Yue