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 the five elements

木
Putonghua pronunciation: mu4
Cantonese pronunciation: muk6
Meanings: wood

木 = 木頭 (mu4 tou2 = wood-head = wood). Radical 木 indicates nature/action/form of wood/trees: 樹 (shu4, tree), 林 (lin2, forest), 松 (song1, pine), 板 (ban3, plank), 柴 (chai2, firewood). 木生火 (mu4 sheng1 huo3 = wood-generates/feeds-fire), 木剋土 (mu4 ke4 tu3 = wood/root - overcomes/break-earth) demonstrate 五行 (wu3 xing2 = five-elements) principles.

Lumberjacks 伐木 (fa2 mu4 = fell-wood/trees), carpenters 鋸木 (ju4 mu4 = saw-wood). 枯木逢春 (ku1 mu4 feng2 chun1 = withered-tree-meets-spring) = revival of happiness/fortune.

木然 (mu4 ran2 = wood-like) = expressionless, 木訥 (mu4 na4 = wood-stutter/speechless) = laconic. Teachers hope students 成材 (cheng2 cai2 = mature-into-trees = become useful/independent people), but some 朽木不可雕 (xiu3 mu4 bu4 ke3 diao1 = rotten-wood-no-can-carve = are un-teachable/hopeless).

by Diana Yue