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 willow trees

枝 (zhī)  
Putonghua pronunciation: zhi1  
Cantonese pronunciation: ji1  
Meanings: branch, twig, stem

枝 (树 shù, tree; 茎 jīng, stem)  
枝 (木 mù, tree/wood + 支 zhī, branch/tributary) = 樹枝 (shù zhī)  
枝葉 (zhī yè) = branches-foliage  
接枝 (jiē zhī) = grafting  
花枝招展 (huā zhī zhāozhǎn) = wavey, dressy woman  
繁殖 (zhízǎn) = begets offspring  

粗枝大葉 (cū zhī dà yè) = bulky; branches/big-leaves  

柳 (liǔ)  
柳絲 (liǔ sī) = willow silk  
柳條 (liǔ tiáo) = willow twigs

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