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:

1\textsuperscript{st} tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2\textsuperscript{nd} tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3\textsuperscript{rd} tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4\textsuperscript{th} 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 Chinese painting

書 (shu1) means writing/calligraphy/books. In China, historically 書畫同源 (shu1 hua4 tong2 yuan2 = writing-painting-same-source = writing and painting originated together). Both use 紙 (zhi3 = paper), 筆 (bi3 = brush), 墨 (mo4 = water-soluble black ink).

國畫 (guo2 hua4 = nation’s-painting = “our country’s painting”) means 中國畫 (Zhong1 Guo2 hua4 = middle-state/nation-painting = Chinese painting). 國畫家 (guo2 hua4 jia1 = nation-painting- masters = painters using traditional medium) paint 山水 (shan1 shui3 = hills-waters = landscapes), 人物 (ren2 wu4 = person-object = people/portraits).

畫畫 (hua4 hua4 = paint-paintings) is 風雅 (feng1 ya3 = wind-elegance = elegant/refined/scholarly) activity/pursuit. 古畫 (gu3 hua4 = ancient-paintings) in Beijing’s and Taipei’s Imperial Palace Museums are 國寶 (guo2 bao3 = national-treasures).

by Diana Yue