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 Chinese painting

筆
Putonghua pronunciation: bi 3
Cantonese pronunciation: bat 1
Meanings: write, pen, strokes, brush, brushstroke

Artist holds 毛筆 (mao2 bi3 = hair-pen/brush = brush) vertically, dips its tip into heavy/diluted 墨 (mo4 = black ink), then draws/paints. 筆墨 (bi3 mo4 = brush-ink) = painter’s style of applying brushstrokes and ink shades.

筆法 (bi2 fa3 = brush-method) = method/style of applying brushstrokes. 吳帶當風 (Wu2 dai4 dang1 feng1 = Wu’s-belts- resemble-facing-wind), 曹衣出水 (Cao2 yi1 chu1 shui3 = Cao’s garments-resemble-emerging-from-water) describe two ancient masters’ style of painting garment-clad human bodies, like Leonardo’s. Landscape painters use 鍊法 (cun1 fa3 = hill-surface-method = groupings of dots/strokes depicting distant hills/rocks/vegetation).

Audubon painted birds in 工筆 (gong1 bi3 = fine/detailed-brushwork). 齊白石 (Qi2 Bai2-shi2) painted shrimps in 意筆 (yi4 bi3 = idea/feeling-brush = free simple brushstrokes showing simplified shapes).

by Diana Yue