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 Guangdong Province

南
Putonghua pronunciation: nan2
Cantonese pronunciation: naam4
Meanings: south, southern

南半球 (nan2 ban4 qiu2 = south-half-ball) = southern hemisphere. 東南亞 (dong1 nan2 ya4 = east-south-“A”sia-transliterated) = southeast Asia.

中國 (Zhong1 Guo2 = middle-kingdom = China) + 華夏 (hua2 xia4 = splendour-Xia-Dynasty = China’s traditional name) = 中華 (Zhong1 Hua2 = middle-splendour = China/Chinese). Guangdong Province is in 華南 (hua2 nan2 = China-south = southern China). Guangzhou is China’s 南大門 (nan2 da4 men2 = south-big-door/gate = southern gateway to China).

Birds/migrant workers 南下 (nan2 xia4 = south-downwards = go to southern regions) for attractive weather/wages. Guangzhou’s 南站 (nan2 zhan4 = south-stand/terminal = Guangzhou South Railway Station) is centre of 高鐵 (= 高速鐵路 = gao1 su4 tie3 lu4 = high-speed-iron-road = high-speed railway) network.

by Diana Yue