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

Putonghua pronunciation: ti 2
Cantonese pronunciation: tai 4
Meanings: title, subject, theme, inscribe, inscription

Paintings have 題材 (ti2 cai2 = subject-matter), 題目 (ti2 mu4 = title-eye = title), e.g. Picasso’s Guernica, 張擇端 (Zhang1 Ze2 duan1)’s 清明上河圖 (Qing1 Ming2 shang4 4 he2 tu2 = Qing-Ming-Festival-up-river-picture = Going up the river during Qingming Festival).

Artist completes painting, 題字 (ti2 zi4 = title/inscribe-words = writes short prose/poem) in the empty space to 點題 (dian3 ti2 = point-out/reveal-theme), 抒懷 (shu1 huai2 = open-bosom = express thoughts/feelings), puts signature and red 印章 (yin4 zhang1 = print-seal = personal seal) at the end.

Great Chinese painters master art of 詩 (shi1 = poetry), 書 (shu1 = calligraphy), 畫 (hua4 = painting), 刻印 (ke1 yin4 = carve-seals = carving name/phrase/sentence in ancient writing script on small stone/jade seals).

by Diana Yue