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 Mid-Autumn Festival

秋
Putonghua pronunciation: qiu 1
Cantonese pronunciation: chau 1
Meanings: autumn

After 立秋 (li4 qiu1 = stand/begin-autumn = 13th solar-term), 秋分 (qiu1 fen1 = autumn-divide = 16th solar-term, autumn equinox) comes 中秋節 (zhong1 qiu1 jie2 = Mid-Autumn-Festival). We enjoy 秋高氣爽 (qiu1 gao1 qi4 shuang3 = autumn-high-air-crisp = autumn’s cool/dry weather), 菊黃蟹肥 (ju1 huang2 xie4 fei2 = chrysanthemums-yellow-crabs-fat = chrysanthemums and crabs season).

秋夜 (qiu1 ye4 = autumn-evenings/night) inspire poetry. 秋水 (qiu1 shui3 = autumn-water) means rivers’ autumn swelling/flooding or attractive woman’s lucid glance. 送秋波 (song4 qiu1 bo11 = present-autumn-wave/ripple) means sending inviting glances/signals to men/companies/parties.

In old China convicts were beheaded at 秋决 (qiu1 jue2 = autumn-executions). 多事之秋 (duo1 shi4 zhi1 qiu1 = many-things/problems-’s-autumn) means period of trouble/unrest in society/organization.

by Diana Yue