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

月
Putonghua pronunciation: yue 4
Cantonese pronunciation: yuet 6
Meanings: moon, month

太陽 = (tai4 yang2 = ultimate-masculinity/strength = sun), 太陰 (tai4 yin1 = ultimate-femininity/gentleness = moon) represent 隱陽 (yin1 yang2 = Yin-and-Yang, opposite cosmic principles/forces). 陰曆 (yin1 li4 = lunar-calendar)'s year has twelve months plus a 閏月 (run4 yue4 = intercalary/leap month).

Women have 月經 (yue4 jing1 = monthly-pass = menstruation). After giving birth, mothers 坐月 (zuo4 yue4 = sit-month = lie/rest for a month). Parents give 滿月酒 (man3 yue4 jiu3 = full-month-wine-party/banquet) for one-month-old baby.

月亮 (yue4 liang4 = moon-bright = the moon) inspired Beethoven’s 月光曲 (yue4 guang1 qu3 = moon-light-song/composition = Moonlight Sonata). In Chinese mythology, 嫦娥奔月 (Chang2 E2 ben1 yue4 = Lady-Chang-E-ran-to-moon = escaped/flew to the moon) and dwells there now.

by Diana Yue