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 more the sky

雲
Putonghua pronunciation: yun2
Cantonese pronunciation: wan4
Meanings: cloud

雲 and 霧 (w4, fog/mist), 雪 (xue3, snow), 露 (lu4, dew), 電 (lei2, thunder), 電 (dian4, electricity/lightning) all have radical 雨 (yu3, rain). Summer sky has 藍天白雲 (lan2 tian1 bai2 yun2 = blue-sky-white-clouds). 火燒雲 (huo3 shao1 yun2 = fire-burn-clouds) = flaming clouds at dawn/dusk. 烏雲 (wu1 yun2 = black-clouds) forecast rain.


風雲人物 (feng1 yun2 ren2 wu4 = wind-cloud-person-thing) means persons recognized as most successful/powerful/influential. 雲遊四方 (yun2 you2 si4 fang1 = cloud-travel-four-directions) describes carefree Daoist/monk who drops chores, roams freely alone faraway.

by Diana Yue