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 autumn

秋
Putonghua pronunciation: qiu1
Cantonese pronunciation: chau1
Meanings: autumn

秋天 (qiu1 tian1 = autumn-sky/day) = 秋季 (qiu1 ji4 = autumn-season). After 立秋 (li4 qiu1 = stand/begin-autumn = 13th solar-term), 秋分 (qiu1 fen1= autumn-divide = 16th solar-term, autumn equinox) come 中秋 (zhong1 qiu1 = mid-autumn), 深秋 (shen1 qiu1 = deep/late-autumn).

Poet sighs: — 葉知秋! (yi1 ye4 zhi1 qiu1 = a-leaf-knows-autumn = A falling leaf – it’s autumn!), —雨成秋! (yi1 yu3 cheng2 qiu1 = a-rain-becomes-autumn = It rained – autumn has set in!) 秋山紅葉 (chui1 shan1 hong2 ye4 = autumn-hills-red-leaves) = hillsides’ fall foliage.

Farmers 秋收冬藏 (qiu1 shou1 dong1 cang2 = autumn-collect-winter-store = reap autumn harvest for winter storage). In old China, death-penalty prisoners were given 秋決 (qiu1 jue2 = autumn-execution).

by Diana Yue