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 looking pretty

美
Putonghua pronunciation: mei3
Cantonese pronunciation: mei5
Meanings: beauty, beautiful

美 = good/beautiful/praiseworthy: 美食 (mei3 shi2 = beautiful-food = gourmet food), 美景 (mei3 jing3 = beautiful-scenery), 美女 (mei3 nu3 = beautiful-women/girls), 美色 (mei3 se1 = beautiful-color = woman’s attractive looks). 美事 (mei3 shi4 = beautiful-thing/event) means praiseworthy event/act e.g. successful rescue of Chilean miners.

Women 愛美 (ai4 mei3 = love-beauty = want to look pretty), buy 美麗 (mei3 li4 = beautiful-pretty) clothes, visit 美容院 (mei3 rong2 yu4an4 = beauty-visage-house = beauty parlor).

國色天香 (guo2 se1 tian1 xiang1 = state's-color-heaven's-aroma) describes extremely beautiful woman. 紅顏薄命 (hong2 yan2 bao2 ming4 = red-visage-thin-life/fate) laments lovely woman’s tragic fate. Saying 美人禍水 (mei3 ren2 huo4 shui3 = beautiful-person-disaster-water) is attributing cause of misfortune/war/defeat to femme fatale.