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 fall colors

山 (shan1)
Cantonese pronunciation: saan1
Meaning: hill, mountain

Putonghua pronunciation: shan1

山 (resembling three peaks) include 大山 (da4 shan1 = big-mountains), 小丘 (xiao3 qiu1 = small-hills), 山峰 (shan1 feng1 = mountain-peaks), 山脉 (shan1 mai4 = mountain-ranges).

Engineers 開山 (kai1 shan1 = open-hill = dig openings in hills), build 山路 (shan1 lu4 = hill/road = roads/paths through hills).

登山 (deng1 shan1 = ascend-mountain) = mountain-climbing. On 秋山 (qi1 shan1 = autumnal-mountain), 山林 (shan1 lin2 = hilly-forests/woods) turn red. 山水畫 (shan1 shui3 hua4 = hills-water/river-painting) = landscape painting.

Chinese people 賭山 (bai4 shan1 = worship-hill/mound = visit ancestor’s grave to remember family’s heritage). 人山人海 (ren2 shan1 ren2 hai3 = people-mountain-people-sea) describes crowded scene. 文山會海 (wen2 shan1 hui4 hai3 = papers/documents-mountain-meetings-sea) describes institutions’ innumerable/endless committees/meetings.