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 O.

This week: Words about fall colors

紅
Putonghua pronunciation: hong2
Cantonese pronunciation: hung4
Meaning: scarlet, red, turn red, popular, prosperous, leftist

紅 (radical 纖 = 絲 si1, silk) = red: 紅日 (hong2 ri4 = red-sun), 血紅 (xue3 hong2 = blood-red), 火紅 (huo3 hong2 = fiery-red), Russia’s 紅軍 (hong2 jün = Red-Army), China’s 紅衛兵 (hong2 wei4 bing1 = red-guard-soldier = Red Guards).

Star 走紅 (zou3 hong2 = run-red = wins popularity). Cars stop at 紅燈 (hong2 deng1 = red-light). Man discovered visiting 紅燈區 (hong2 deng1 qu1 = red-light-district) 臉紅 (lian3 hong2 = face-red = blushes).

紅樹 (hong2 shu4 = red-tree) = trees with red flowers/leaves, e.g. 楓樹 (feng1 shu4 = maple-tree). 紅樹林 (hong2 shu4 lin2 = red-tree-grove) = mangrove forest. 看破紅塵 (kan4 po4 hong2 chen2 = see-through-red-dust) means disillusioned about glitzy world/life’s vanities/follies.

by Diana Yue