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 narcissism

美 = lovely/fine: 美食 (mei3 shi2 = fine/gourmet-food), 美玉 (mei3 yu4 = fine/precious-jade), 美夢 (mei3 meng4 = lovely/enchanting-dream). 美好 (mei2 hao3 = lovely-good) describes things appreciated/promising: life's 美好日子 (mei2 hao3 ri4 zi0 = lovely-good-days diminutive = happy days), younger's 美好前程 (mei2 hao3 qian2 cheng2 = lovely-good-ahead-journey = promising future).

真 (zhen1, truth), 善 (shan4, goodness), 美 (beauty) are standards for judging people/actions. 美男子 (mei3 nan2 zi0 = handsome-man). 美人 (mei3 ren2 = beautiful-person) = 美女 (mei2 nu3 = beautiful-woman). 美事 (mei3 shi4 = lovely-event) = good/heart-lifting outcome e.g. couple’s union/reunion, enemies’ reconciliation.

Women 愛美 (ai4 mei3 = love-beauty = desire beautiful looks), visit 美容院 (mei3 rong2 yuan4 = beauty-visage-house = beauty parlor).

by Diana Yue