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 Mid-Autumn Festival

Putonghua pronunciation: ming 2
Cantonese pronunciation: ming 4
Meanings: bright, clear

明 = 日 (ri4, sun) + 月 (yue4, moon): 明月 (ming2 yue4 = bright-moon), 明星 (ming2 xing1 = bright-star/movie-star), 明亮 (ming2 liang4 = brightly-lit). “明白!” (ming2 bai2 = clear-white) means “Understand!”

光明 (guang1 ming2 = brightness/light) is opposite of 黑暗 (hei1 an4 = black-dark = darkness). Ancient Persia’s 拜火教 (bai4 huo3 jiao4 = worship-fire-religion = Manichaeism) came to China and became 明教 (ming2 jiao4 = bright-religion).

Liberals endorse 開明 (kai1 ming2 = open-bright = enlightened) thinking. 恩怨分明 (en1 yuan4 fen1 ming2 = favor-offence-discriminately) means clear-cut distinction between favors/friends and offences/foes. All Chinese denounce British-French soldiers’ 1860 burning/looting of Beijing’s imperial garden 圆明园 (yuan2 ming2 yuan2 = round-bright-garden = Garden of Political/Moral Enlightenment/Perfection).

by Diana Yue