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

Putonghua pronunciation: gu 4
Cantonese pronunciation: goo 3
Meanings: look at, visit, heed, attend, take care of

影 = shadow/shape: 人影 (ren2 ying3 = person-shadow = indistinct human figure), 背影 (bei4 ying3 = back-shadow = person’s back-view), 黑影 (hei1 ying3 = black/dark-shadow), 幻影 (huan4 ying3 = fantasized/unreal-shadow), 鬼影 (gui2 ying3 = ghost-shadow) = phantom. 剪影 (jian2 ying3 = scissor-cut-shadow) = silhouette/vignette.

鏡子 (jing4 zi0 = mirror-diminutive) reflects 影像 (ying3 xiang4 = shadow-likeness = images). Calm lake has 倒影 (dao2 ying3 = up-side-down-shadow = reflections). 影響 (ying2 xiang3 = shadow-sound/echo = responses) = influence. Opposition party has 影子內閣 (ying2 zi0 nei4 ge2 = shadow-diminutive-interior-attic = shadow cabinet).

Paparazzi 捕風捉影 (bu4 feng1 zhuo1 ying3 = capture-wind-catch-shadow = pick-up unsubstantiated hearsay), 影射 (ying3 she4 = shadow-shoot/project = allude to by innuendo) celebrities.

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