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 flowers

Putonghua pronunciation: kai1
Cantonese pronunciation: hoi1
Meanings: open, develop

開 (radical 門 men2, pair of door-panels) means open: 開門! (kai1 men2 = Open the door!), 開始 (kai1 shi3 = open-origin = beginning/inauguration), 開口 (kai1 shou3 = open-mouth = speak/voice opinion), 開心 (kai1 xin1 = open-heart = feeling happy). Pioneers 開拓 (kai1 tuo4 = open-up-expand) borders. 開放 (kai1 fang4 = open-release) describes open-minded/uninhibited/liberal person/policy.

開花 (kai1 hua1 = open-flower) = bloom: 半開 (ban4 kai1 = half-bloom), 盛開 (sheng4 kai1 = grand-open = full bloom). 開花結果 (kai1 hua1 jie2 guo3 = bloom-flowers-produce-fruit) = marriage/labor getting progress and positive result.

開門見山 (kai1 men2 jian4 shan1 = open-door-see-mountain) = speak out directly. 雲開見月 (yun2 kai1 jian4 yue4 = clouds-open/part-see/appear-moon) = hardships/obstacles finally dispelled.

by Diana Yue