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 false hopes

Putonghua pronunciation: wang4
Cantonese pronunciation: mong6
Meanings: look, see, observe, fame

Pictogram/ideogram 望 indicates elevated person looking afar: 望見 (wang4 jian4 = look-see/espy), 眺望 (tiao4 wang4 = look-aside/afar-look = look afar), 望遠鏡 (wang4 yuan3 jing4 = look/see-far-mirror = telescope/binoculars). 探望 (tan4 wang4 = probe-look/see) = visit.

希望 (xi1 wang4 = hope-see) = hope; 有望 (you3 wang4 = has-hope = likely/hopeful); 無望 (wu2 wang4 = has-no-hope); 絕望 jue2 wang4 = end-hope = hopeless/desperate). 仰望 (yang3 wang4 = raise-head/eyes-look) = adore. 望族 (wang4 zu2 = distinguished-clan/family) has 名望 (ming2 wang4 = name-adored = fame). 望穿秋水 (wang4 qian1 qiu1 shui3 = look-break-autumn-water, i.e. eyes) = keenly awaiting person/event.

Traditional Chinese doctors diagnose illnesses by 望 (wang4, looking/observing), 聞 (wen2, hearing/listening), 問 (wen4, asking questions), 切 (qie4, analyzing/matching).

by Diana Yue