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 partying

夜
Putonghua pronunciation: ye 4
Cantonese pronunciation: ye 6
Meanings: night

夜 succeeds 日 (ri4, sun/day). Mothers日夜禱告 (ri4 ye4 dao3 gao4 = day-night-pray-tell/beseech = pray day-and-night) for troops’ return. Students 開夜車 (kai1 ye4 che4 = start/drive-night-car = cram for exams). 三更 (san1 geng1 = third-gong) is midnight (night-watch gong sounds at 8pm, 10pm, midnight, 2am, 4am, 6am).

Playboys夜夜笙歌 (ye4 yr4 sheng1 ge1 = night-night-reed-pipe-songs = lead merry/party-going lifestyle). 錦衣夜行 (jin3 yi1 ye4 xing2 = brocade-clothes-night-walk = wearing finery in darkness) laments beauty/value going unnoticed.

Tourists see 香港之夜 (Xiang1 Gang3 zhi1 ye4 = Hong Kong’s -night = Hong Kong by night), have 宵夜 (xiao1 ye4 = night-night = late-night snacks). Party-crashers feel “夜未央” (ye4 wei4 yang1 = night-not-yet-end = “The night is still young!”)

by Diana Yue