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

香

Putonghua pronunciation: xiang1
Cantonese pronunciation: heung1
Meanings: fragrant, aroma, incense

香 = 香氣 (xiang1 qi4 = fragrant/nice-vapor/smell), 香味 (xiang1 wei4 = fragrant/nice-smell/taste). 香水 (xiang1 shui3 = fragrant-water = perfumes) have 花香 (hua1 xiang1 = flowers fragrance). Chefs use 香草 (xiang1 cao3 = aromatic-herbs), 香料 (xiang1 liao4 = fragrant-material = spices). Oven-fresh cakes 香噴噴 (xiang1 en4 pen4 = fragrant-puff-puff = whiffing aroma).

香 also means incense/joss-stick: 香爐 (xiang1 lu2 = incense-oven = incense-burner), 燒香 (shao1 xiang1 = burn-incense/joss-sticks). 香港 (English name “Hong Kong”, Putonghua Xiang1 Gang3, Cantonese Heung1 Gong2 = joss-sticks-harbor) got her name from exporting joss-sticks.

Poets praise 梅花 (mei2 hua1 = plum-blossoms)’s 幽香 (you1 xiang1 = subtle-fragrance). Philosophers adore serene 蓮花 (lian2 hua1 = lotus-flowers): 香遠益清 (xiang1 yuan3 yil qing1 = “Fragrance-carried-afar-even-purer!”)

by Diana Yue