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

梅
Putonghua pronunciation: mei2
Cantonese pronunciation: mooi4
Meanings: Chinese plum

梅 (Chinese plum, Latin prunus mume, Japanese name “ume”) is tree bearing 梅花 (mei2 hua1 = Chinese-plum-blossom) which symbolizes elegance/purity/perseverance. In winter/spring, hikers 踏雪尋梅 (ta4 xue3 xun2 mei2 = step-snow-search-plum = search for blossoming plum-trees in snow).

Plum-tree bears 梅子 (mei2 zi3 = plum-son/fruit = plum-fruit) in early summer. 酸梅湯 (suan1 mei2 tang1 = sour-plum-soup = sugared plum juice) is a cold summer drink.

Botanically distinguished from 梅, 蜜梅 (la4 mei2 = wax-plum-flower = Latin chimonanthus praecox = wintersweet, also called 蜜梅 la4 mei2 = 12th-month-plum-flower), has flowers yellow like 蜜蠟 (mi4 la4 = honey-wax = beeswax/non-transparent-amber). Its buds, used in Chinese medicine, can 解暑生津 (jie3 shu3 sheng1 jin1 = relieve-summer-heat-produce-saliva = relieve fevers/thirst).

by Diana Yue