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 winter past-times**

**雪**

Putonghua pronunciation: xüe3
Cantonese pronunciation: suet3
Meaning: snow, snow-white

雪 (radical 雨 yǔ3, rain) = snow: 下雪 (xia4 xüe3 = down/fall-snow = snowing), 雪雨 (xüe3 yǔ3 = snow-rain = sleet), 雪景 (xüe3 jing3 = snowy-scenery), 雪白 (xüe3 bai2 = snow-white). 雪豹 (xüe3 bao4 = snow-leopards) inhabit 雪山 (xüe3 shan1 = snow-capped-mountains/peaks).

In Chinese lunar calendar, solar terms 小雪 (xia1 xüe3 = minor-snow, 22nd November), 大雪 (da4 xüe3 = major-snow, 7th December) mark winter’s approach.

雪花 (xüe3 hua1 = snow-flower) = snowflakes. Kids 堆雪人 (dui1 xüe3 ren2 = pile/make-snow-men), 掷雪球 (zhi4 xüe3 qiu2 = throw-snow-balls), 滑雪 (hua2 xüe3 = slide-snow) = skiing.

In 冰天雪地 (bing1 tian1 xüe3 di4 = ice-sky-snow-land = snowy/frozen outdoors), beware 雪崩 (xüe3 beng1 = snow-collapse = avalanches).

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