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 blossoming trees

梅
Putonghua pronunciation: mei2
Cantonese pronunciation: mooi4
Meaning: plum


梅開二度 (mei2 kai1 er4 du4 = plum-tree-blooms-two-times) describes twice-happening good thing, e.g. foot-ball scoring second goal. 但望梅止渴 (wang4 mei2 zhi3 ke3 = look-at-plum-trees-stop/quench-thirst) means placating oneself/others with distant hopes/promises.

暗香疏影 (an4 xiang1 shu1 ying3 = subdued-fragrance-sparse-shadows) typically describes sparsely-flowered, faintly-fragrant sprig of plum-blossoms. Forest of plum-trees yielding white flowers is 香雪海 (xiang1 xue3 hai3 = fragrant-snowy-sea = fragrant sea of snow).

by Diana Yue