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 Narcissus

湖
Putonghua pronunciation: hu2
Cantonese pronunciation: wo4
Meanings: lake

湖 (radical 水 = 水 shui3, water) = 泊 (po1 = lake). England’s 湖區 (hu2 qü = Lake-District) is famous for 湖光山色 (hu2 guang1 shan1 se1 = lake-brilliance-hill-colors = shimmering lakes nestling among verdant hills). 尼斯湖怪 (ni2 si1 hu2 guai4 = “Ness”-transliterated-lake-strange) = Scotland’s Loch Ness monster.

People from 五湖四海 (wu3 hu2 si4 hai3 = five-lakes-four-seas = all regions/sectors) join popular movement. 江湖人物 (jiang1 hu2 ren2 wu4 = river-lake-person-thing) means characters with shady/outlaw background/connections.

Handsome hunter Narcissus獵鹿 (lie4 lu4 = hunted-for-deer), rested at 湖畔 (hu2 pan4 = lake-side), sipped 湖水 (hu2 shui3 = lake’s-water), 臨湖自照 (lin2 hu2 zi4 zhao4 = overlooking-lake-self-reflect = looked at himself in the lake).

by Diana Yue