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

桃
Putonghua pronunciation: tao2
Cantonese pronunciation: to4
Meaning: peach

桃 (radical 木 mu4, wood/tree) means 桃花 (tao2 hua1 = peach-flower), 桃樹 (tao2 shu4 = peach-tree), 桃子 (tao2 zi0 = peach-son/diminutive = peach). 核桃 (he2 tao2 = nucleus-pear) = walnut. 桃駿李 (tao2 bo2 li3 = peach-grafted-to-plum) is nectarine's Chinese name.

桃李爭春 (tao2 li3 zheng1 chun1 = peach-blossoms-plum-blossoms-vie-for-spring) describes flowering trees blossoming in springtime. 世外桃源 (shi4 wai4 toa2 yuan2 = world-beyond-peach-stream-source) is Utopia discovered by fisherman rowing upstream amidst blooming peach-trees.

桃花眼 (tao2 hua1 yan3 = peach-blossom-eyes) describes woman's sexy/luring eyes. 桃色事件 (tao2 e1 shi4 jian4 = peach-color-event-item) = sex scandal. Idiom 斷袖分桃 (duan4 xiu4 fen1 tao2 = slit-sleeve-sharing-pear) describes gay man quietly slitting sleeve to let beloved partner sleep.

by Diana Yue